

This Singular Place

Mid-Campaign Speech

October 25, 1997

WELCOME BACK to Sanders Theatre, now restored and burnished, but no less familiar than when many of us met here more than three years ago, to begin the first University-wide campaign in Harvard's history.

The campaign has gone remarkably well by any conceivable standard. And our endowment has been bounding through a period of uninhibited robustness, especially since 1994. As a result, we might well be tempted to relax our campaign efforts, on the theory that we can comfortably coast the rest of the way home. Or we might well ask whether Harvard actually has a compelling need for any more resources at this point.

I take these considerations very seriously, but I admit that I have no real doubt about my own conclusions. I would like to start with a backward glance, if only to recall where we began, and how quickly, as well as unpredictably, so many things have changed in the brief time since we set out together.

In 1992, I had read far less of the history of Harvard than I would have wished. But even from my modest store of knowl-

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edge, I remembered one (among many) of President Conant's most authoritative utterances: uncompromising words, portentous and ominous, that haunted me with all the wit and charm of a Greek tragic chorus: "Decentralization in fund-raising," said President Conant nearly fifty years ago, "is essential here at Harvard. Tentative proposals . . . to emphasize this point are now under consideration." And, President Conant stressed, it will be "extremely difficult to present an adequate picture of what we plan and hope to the alumni as a body, or even to the Board of Overseers."

For weeks on end, Mr. Conant's declamation echoed in the chambers of my mind. Could we possibly succeed with a full-fledged, collaborative, University-wide campaign? Could we conceivably create a plan that would be even faintly intelligible to alumni and friends, or to the Overseers and Corporation, or even to ourselves – those of us inside Harvard? Moreover, President Conant's words seemed all the more sobering because of the difficult economic conditions that prevailed in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

We may have forgotten that the entire nation was then in a state of considerable recession: severe downsizing; massive job losses; a burgeoning federal deficit; pervasive uncertainty about the future: about Social Security, social services, and health care; and, perhaps most of all, there were serious worries about America's ability to compete effectively in the new global economy.

Let us also remember not just the national scene, but Harvard's own predicament. It was far from encouraging. In 1991, several of our schools, institutes, and other units were showing negative financial results. The Faculty of Arts and Sciences had an annual operating deficit of about \$12 million. The total University-wide deficit was about \$42 million. We began our own regime of downsizing and economies, which has finally, during the last two years, produced a balanced budget.

Then too, the financial markets were inscrutable at best – not

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at all obviously bullish – back in 1991. Harvard wrote off \$200 million in endowment losses that year, and we had a total return of exactly 1.1 percent. Nor was that single year a fluke: the University's average total return for the four years from 1988 through 1991 was 6.6 percent per year, a level which, if it had continued, would have quickly led to a steady erosion of our endowment's actual purchasing power. It was not so very long afterward that I (speaking to many of you) paraphrased Marshal Foch's spirited staccato telegraphic communiqué, which he dispatched during the most somber hours of the Second Battle of the Marne in 1918: Our center is giving way, our right is in retreat; situation excellent; we are attacking.

What can we learn from the tale of these past several years? At least one or two useful home truths.

First, we should never expect any existing situation, whether gloomy or glittery, to last indefinitely, or even for very long. This seems self-evident. But our collective memory is often short-lived, and we have to keep reminding ourselves that today's economic euphoria tends to anaesthetize any trace of yesterday's lugubriousness. Also, vice versa. Certain kinds of institutions (and especially universities) cannot exist or thrive if they allow themselves to ride too closely the ups and downs of every minor or major boom and bust. They simply have to plan and operate in terms of the long run, and they have to take the long view. They need to be sensibly prudent in heady times, just as they must be seaworthy and steady when the going gets rough. That means setting a course that can be maintained with real consistency through any number of vicissitudes: "Calm rising," as our hymn has it, "through change and through storm."

From this perspective, it makes no more sense to allow our expectations (or plans) concerning Harvard's extended future to be based on the surreal, favorable financial circumstances of the last three to four years, than it would have been sensible to base them on the totally different (and far more discouraging) condi-

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tions of 1991 or 1992. *Harv-ars longa, fortuna breva, pecunia fugienta*, which, roughly translated (inside out), means “Fortune is fickle, the markets will falter, but Harvard must be here forever.”

So if we are asked whether we can coast through the rest of the campaign, with \$500 million still to raise, or whether we can rest, soporifically tranquilized, on our endowment laurels, then our reply, I feel certain, must be that we dare not.

Not only should we expect our share of down times ahead, but we also need to keep in mind that several major campaign priorities are still lagging. These include resources for Widener Library and other parts of our extraordinary library system; endowments for important new professorships in several fields, especially to strengthen the College and undergraduate teaching; support for our most hard-pressed professional schools, such as Education and Divinity; funds to maintain our momentum in information technology and international studies; plus financial aid – at the graduate and professional school level, as well as for undergraduates.

In other words, we will not really have succeeded if we achieve our overall “dollar goal,” formidable as that is, but fail to complete some of the most significant projects that we identified, at the very beginning of this campaign, as essential to Harvard’s future.

This is not the moment to talk about the case for each of those specific projects. But I do want to suggest that these (and other) priorities clearly relate, in their scale and variety and reach, to the purposes of a national and international university, as well as those of a great undergraduate college. They also signal to me (and this is something that I want to stress today) that higher education has now entered what is really a new era, with new and difficult conditions as well as stimulating but imposing challenges.

Navigating the new global, intergalactic spaces, and interpreting our unfolding genomic future (so that we make the right judgments, and take the right actions), is the most important task we face as we enter the final phases of the campaign and begin to think about the landscape that lies beyond.

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Let me elaborate a little about what I mean when I say we are now in a new era. If we scan the history of American higher education, it is clear that there have been two major periods of great transformation and expansion.

The first began in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and continued into the early part of the twentieth. This was our heroic, Homeric, epic age. At the heart of this ancient saga was the struggle (led by Harvard) to turn miniature colleges into emergent universities. Graduate studies were created on the Germanic model, and advanced students, in growing numbers, soon began to undertake their winding and often dolorous, Dantesque sojourn in pursuit of the Ph.D.

Professional school education, meanwhile, was reinvented. Serious research began to be respected, although it was in many quarters still highly suspect. Undergraduates were suddenly placed in direct contact with major scholars. Teaching began to be more a matter of asking questions than transmitting prefabricated answers. Dozens of new fields of knowledge were opened up.

In short, another age of discovery – a sort of academic Magellan-like efflorescence – had begun.

There was a more or less unstoppable urge on the part of compulsive tycoons, middle-class classicists, pecunious as well as impecunious botanists, insatiable bibliophiles, and indomitable entomologists and archaeologists to travel, search, unearth, possess, organize, display, study, and, in effect, conquer everything in sight, by amassing collections of every conceivable kind of artifact, manuscript, glacial pebble, rare or well-done book, organic specimen, art object, anatomical revelation, astronomical observation, and countless other phenomena. At Harvard, the Peabody Museum, the art museum, the Warren Museum at the Medical School, the new observatory, and the Museum of Comparative Zoology were only a few of the tangible structures created by this powerful surge of sustained inquiry and acquisition.

If we wanted to generalize, succinctly, about this entire era,

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when so many Giants walked our Earth, we might well say that aspirations grew, knowledge grew, the curriculum grew, buildings grew, and the budget grew. In addition, at least one penetrating fundamental financial insight remained as a significant legacy, well into the future.

That insight appears simple in retrospect but was less obvious at the time and has turned out to be crucial. It was the recognition that the only way to create a major university (with major museums, libraries, research institutes, and fields of learning that were important but not necessarily populous) was to endow, as far as possible, every new activity. In that way, the total educational program – and total intellectual capacity – of the University could be vastly enriched and intensified without requiring student tuition and fees to bear more than a fraction of the cost.

As we ponder why fund-raising campaigns are important, and why large endowments are essential, it is helpful to remember that it is precisely these endowments, together with unrestricted gifts, that undergird (just as one example) the resources of the entire Harvard library system: ninety-two libraries of thirteen million volumes, with on-line access to the total catalogue as well as to a great deal of text, constituting the greatest university library in the world. All of this is available to our students, with only a small fraction of the cost being charged to tuition.

I want to shift now to that second major transformation (and expansion) of American higher education, which I mentioned earlier. This came right after World War II. At the risk of great oversimplification, I believe we can say that the war demonstrated, as never before, that brains – motivated, marshaled, and focused – matter infinitely more than brawn. Human commitment and great courage were certainly indispensable. But the war showed us that a very great concentration of intelligence – in advanced cryptography, in the invention and refinement of radar, in the skill that can manage complex organizations (including the difficult process of collaborative strategic decision making), or in the discovery of nuclear fission and fusion – concentrated

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intelligence at work in all these and other areas mattered decisively, and made it possible for our own nation and others to move forward from a state of almost complete unpreparedness to the point where talent and determination, with enough raw materials and production capacity, could finally prevail.

By 1945, many people realized that what worked in war could also work in peace. So it was not surprising that education and research were at the top of our national agenda by the late 1940s. Probably the most crucial turning point here, reached by 1950, was the decision to rely primarily on our already existing major universities for America's basic research effort, rather than to build a separate government system of research institutes (on the model of some European and other countries). Since the universities represented high-quality assets-in-being, the United States had, almost immediately, a powerful, competitive, and immensely successful research enterprise under way, operating at full tilt. The program included many disciplines and fields of knowledge. It soon began to produce an unprecedented number of discoveries and new insights. In fact, by far the largest number of significant breakthroughs since World War II – from the elucidation of DNA, in all its intricacy and brilliant simplicity, to the creation of high-speed computer networks, to the dramatic unmasking (not so long ago) of the Top Quark, in the deep obscurity of its remote hideaway – all of these had their origin in university-based research projects, supported mainly by our federal government.

But research alone was not, of course, enough. However much we needed ideas, we certainly did not need them disembodied. As a result, the government (together with the major private foundations and individual universities) began a program during the 1950s to expand graduate and professional education so that there would be a steady flow of well-educated and trained people who were prepared to take up, throughout our society, the increasing number of positions that required new kinds of talent and leadership ability.

Therefore, when we utter the word “research,” we ought to

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link it immediately to the word “education,” at least when we are talking about a major university. The two activities, at their best, have always been linked together. The fact that they reinforce one another, at all levels, from the undergraduate college through to our executive education programs, is exactly what has made the American model of a university – and certainly Harvard – so distinctive, and so effective.

All of this may sound as if the postwar system were somehow invincible. But we know of course that it was not. To understand why, we simply have to remember the long rainy monsoon season (or was it a drought?) from about 1969 to 1982. Either way, there were far too many economic phenomena of one kind, and far too few of another, producing more than a decade of what we poetically dubbed “stagflation.”

Those were the years when many colleges and universities posted almost daily deficits. Physical plant maintenance was often deferred. Institutions watched endowments erode and saw faculty and staff salaries shrink steadily in the face of a double-digitizing CPI. That was also the era when need-blind admissions and need-based student financial aid first began to falter, and when major foundation support for graduate student fellowships literally plummeted from one year to the next (and it has never really rebounded). State universities and colleges had some of their first seismic shocks; over the years since then, circumstances have become worse for them, rather than better.

These changes (and others) were really structural, not transient, in nature: that is, we were not just watching blips on a screen, but were experiencing much deeper tectonic shifts in the economics of higher education, compared with the period between 1950 and 1970. Of course, there have been fluctuations since then, some ups and some downs. But the basic underlying situation has not changed. For some time now there have been fewer flexible federal and state revenues available, and there are many more claimants (some of them with very urgent needs) for government

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as well as foundation dollars. All of this represents an absolutely major change. In the new era that we have entered, there will continue to be less external financial support, in “real” terms, from several key sources, just at a moment when the need and the demand for education (as well as for new ideas and discoveries in research) are at their maximum. That is the essence of our current situation.

So the question for all of us, and certainly for Harvard, is how we move ahead, keeping our impetus and our edge, to meet the challenges that are surely there, and do so under conditions that will probably be more difficult, not less.

We certainly can not allow ourselves to suffer the fate of Lord Rosebery, whom Bernard Shaw characterized as “someone who never missed an occasion to let slip an opportunity.”

Our challenges, and opportunities, are real, and they have to be seen in relation to long-term changes already taking place in society. In this way, the larger pattern of events may become more clear to us and may help us to chart our own directions with more certainty.

For instance, the strong forces that have recently made our world so thoroughly interconnected are unlikely to be reversed. The Internet, instantaneous worldwide satellite connections, and rapid transportation systems are here to stay. Similar developments have produced fluid global financial markets, and have led to many more open, penetrable societies that can no longer be shielded behind iron curtains. Porous boundaries permit the quick movement of people, ideas, goods, economic capital, particles of culture (or particles of sulfur dioxide) from country to country. More societies are less authoritarian and more democratic than even half a decade ago. One possible result of all these changes is greater cooperation among peoples and nations. But another might be a growing number of close encounters that are as likely to end in collision and conflict as in collaboration.

We also know that over the next quarter century to half cen-

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tury, there will be major demographic changes in our own country, and throughout the world. There will almost certainly be, over time, more major centers of power, certainly in Asia, and perhaps elsewhere. Some “minority” groups will become majorities. Women will play a greater and greater role in public life, even, I believe, in those societies that now seem to be moving in quite the opposite direction. All in all, it will be essential for people to be able to work effectively, on an almost daily basis, with a widening range of fellow human beings from different national and other backgrounds.

This will not be easy. The history of our species does not suggest that we have often managed to get on so very swimmingly together, in the same little pond, over the centuries. When he was President of France, Charles de Gaulle (not always impeccably patient in the face of contrary views) once asked in exasperation: “How can you [possibly] govern a country which has 246 varieties of cheese?” Well, our little planet is now much farther along the path toward an infinite number of anthropoid specimens, and we need to learn how to cope with that.

If the future turns out to be anything like this rough sketch, what are the implications concerning an educational agenda for Harvard – not only through the end of this campaign, but also well beyond? What steps should we be taking to make certain that the University stays abreast: to ensure that those who follow us will feel that we have done as much for them as our predecessors did for us?

First, it means that we have no choice but to keep up our momentum in the field of international studies. If the world will be a more crowded and interdependent place, then our students and our faculty must have better opportunities to travel, explore, and learn about what is “out there.” And we also need to keep up the flow of students, scholars, and professionals who come to Cambridge from abroad to study at Harvard and learn about the United States.

Let’s not forget that since the end of the Cold War, vast

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archives that had been closed for generations have now become accessible, and hundreds of thousands of people, in countries around the globe, are for the first time able and willing to speak freely about their own histories, their societies, and their experiences. This situation represents a prodigious opportunity, and an immense challenge, for our scholars and students. The historical record (and the living presence) of dozens of nations and cultures can now be examined, and is already in the process of being reassessed, reinterpreted, and rewritten.

Therefore, we need research, travel, and fellowship funds, as well as endowed faculty positions, to carry this major project forward. We also need to complete the funding for, and then create, our projected new Center for International Studies. Sidney Knafel has given us an exceptional lead gift, but there is a substantial distance still to go. This complex of buildings will bring together, in improved and expanded space, most of our regional and international institutes. It will take us far toward achieving a greater level of integration in all our international programs. It will, in fact, represent the first significant visible presence in Harvard's history of our commitment to international studies, conceived on a world-wide scale.

I believe this is also the moment for Harvard to consider locating a limited number of outposts overseas, the main purpose of which would be to facilitate research and study by the many Harvard faculty and students who now undertake fieldwork in countries around the world. We need to be able to sustain their projects over time, to build longer-term relationships with people and nations abroad, and to place ourselves more directly in touch with the societies that we study. In other words, we need to extend our wings – tentatively, carefully, but with some sense of real excitement.

A second major priority is the further development of our modern information systems. It is hard to make this enterprise sound poetic. Even so, the new networks make a difference to every part of education, because they open up limitless sources

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of information and knowledge, and unlike other media, such as television or radio or film, these technologies could scarcely be more versatile or interactive.

They are already creating the equivalent of an enormous electronic research library whose volumes are on line rather than on shelves. They virtually force users to take a position of command, the driver's seat, compelling them to search, to seek, to find, and not to yield. In this way, they not only provide us with data, images, and information, but they also help to transform our pedagogy, placing the emphasis on the process of framing questions and looking for relevant evidence in order to test ideas: a form of what President Lowell called "self-education under guidance," and what President Conant referred to as "education by self-directed study."

If we are interested in advancing the cause of excellent teaching and learning in Harvard College and throughout the University, then the new technologies, properly used, are very much on our side. They also remind us of the ideal I mentioned earlier: the goal of integrating research, exploration, teaching, discovering, and learning in a way that dissolves the lines between them, bringing faculty and students together in what is really a common pursuit.

As these technologies develop, faculty and students will participate more frequently in discussion groups and joint classes on-line with students and faculty at other institutions – even in other countries. Harvard will be invisibly but significantly connected to all parts of the world through this filament-like network, where time and space are immediately collapsed. Here and elsewhere we can sense the obvious parallels with the revolution in international studies that I discussed a minute ago.

The next agenda topic concerns the question of diversity in its largest terms: how we manage to live our lives in some reasonable state of national and international harmony, given all the factors that I have already described – including the coming demographic changes – as well as the possibilities for conflict as the world shrinks and the pace of life continues to quicken.

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Here I want only to say again, as I have before, that unless we are willing to continue our commitment to diversity in our colleges and universities, bringing together students from different backgrounds – from many geographic regions, from a variety of religious, ethnic, and racial groups representing a wide span of interests and talents – unless we can create the conditions in college that will allow our students to learn directly from one another, to discuss and test their different beliefs and points of view, outside the classroom as well as inside, then we will not have educated them fully, or prepared them to take on the role of leaders, either in our own diverse democratic society or in the larger, complicated, international arena.

From a financial point of view, the key to ensuring diversity in all its dimensions is the very same one that allows us to enroll, year after year, the best entering classes in the nation: need-blind admissions and need-based financial aid. This offers the most direct way to bring down the actual cost of college to students and parents alike. Nearly half of our undergraduates are awarded scholarships which average (on a sliding scale) about \$13,500 per student this year, for a total of almost \$40 million in undergraduate student aid alone. The system is equitable. It means that we have enough tuition income to help protect the quality of our programs, but it is also cost-effective institutionally. Most of all, it keeps Harvard well in the lead in the drive to attract the very best talent.

Let me also add at this moment a word about Harvard's commitment to the education and advancement of women. Recently, the Kennedy School inaugurated a new initiative in the field of "Women and Public Policy." The Women's Studies program in Arts and Sciences continues to grow, increasing its range of subjects and disciplines. Last spring, Professor Shirley Williams organized a major international conference on "Women and Leadership," including an ambitious research agenda which has already begun to develop. Meanwhile, during the past six years, the rate at which women are being appointed to tenure positions

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in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences has increased by more than 50 percent.

Collaborative work with Radcliffe has helped Harvard to make progress in several of these areas. There is still much to be done, but the signals are pointing in the right direction. I am also happy to report that we have, during the past year and a half, received a number of campaign commitments, amounting to more than \$5 million, that are specifically intended to support some of the Harvard initiatives I have just described, as well as others that may evolve. This is a real boost, and points the way forward.

So our unfolding University agenda is ambitious, the needs are real, and we must keep pressing.

In closing, let me mention a few of the things that lie at the very heart of what we are and what we do. It matters that we are a residential college and university. The energy we feel in the air; the excitement and intensity that are the essence of our life here; the visible history present in our buildings, and our walkways; the friendships that have grown from the days and years spent together in this singular place: these depend deeply on the fact that we are rooted here, that we are a residential community whose values still echo the independent and questing spirit of our founders – their determination to build an institution that would last, that would have a far-reaching effect on learning, on education, and on the life of its society.

Consequently, as we think about a future in which Harvard will be more extended in time and space (electronically as well as tangibly), in which there will be more complexity, more networks and worldwide webs (some of our own making), it is important to remember that we are strongly grounded, right here, as well as being far-flung and international. And the challenges, great as they are, are not new for this institution. In fact, every major stride forward in our history has left us with a surprised sense of how much had been accomplished, and how much more still remained to be done.

As he contemplated the occasion of Harvard's three hundredth

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anniversary, in 1936, President Conant wondered about the fate of Harvard – and other private universities – during the coming century:

*As compared with even one hundred years ago, our universities are [now] startlingly large and complex; their buildings and equipment are great beyond the imagination of our ancestors; their faculties and students alike have facilities never before at the disposal of any body of scholars. What will be the fate of these institutions thus suddenly developed to such dimensions? Can they escape the curse which has so often plagued large human enterprises well established by a significant history, – the curse of complacent mediocrity? What will be written and said about the role of the university ... [particularly Harvard], when the four hundredth celebration draws near?*¹

Well, the four hundredth anniversary has drawn a good deal closer since 1936, and, so far at least, I do not see signs of “complacent mediocrity.” For that, we owe thanks to many who have preceded us. But today I want most of all to express my debt – Harvard’s debt – to all of you.

These last years have achieved much of what we hoped. They have drawn us together, have created fast friendships among us, and have already set standards beyond what we imagined when we first began. The time has not been always easy. We have lost – sadly, sometimes tragically – wonderful partners along the way: Tom and Virginia Cabot, John and Peter Loeb, and others who have made such a great difference in spirit to us. “Complacent mediocrity” was certainly not their style, and it cannot be ours. So as we conclude, and look to tomorrow, let us remember that we are, for this generation, the trustees of this very great university, and we need to reach as far and as high as we can – through calm, through change, and even through storm.

1 James B. Conant, *Report of the President to the Board of Overseers 1934–35*, 6.