

“Find Your Life’s Passion in Public Service”

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ean Dorn, Dean Sherman, Dean Rostow, faculty, staff, friends, guests...and especially graduates. It is an honor to receive the University of Texas 1999 Distinguished Alumnus Award. I feel doubly honored today to also have been asked by the graduates of the LBJ School to speak at this commencement, and to be here with students who have chosen public service careers.

Almost a quarter century ago, I successfully convinced Dagmar Hamilton and the Admissions Committee that the LBJ School experience was just what I needed to make a larger contribution. And twenty-one years ago this month, Dean Rostow gave me that ticket when she handed me my degree--a degree that I have been very, very proud of ever since.

I have said dozens and dozens of times in my life that the LBJ School was the real turning point for me--giving me the skills and the confidence to make a contribution in the public arena. Whether it was struggling to succeed in Lodis Rhodes’ policy research project, or learning about leading in Ken Tolo’s policy research project, or listening to Lady Bird Johnson at the ranch talk about service, or spending hours and hours in my study carrel--or hours and hours at El Rancho Restaurant with my future wife -- I left prepared.

I’ve never for a second regretted my educational choices, and neither -- I think -- will you.

Whether you want to be an administrator of public programs, a policy wonk, a budget analyst, or a politician--whether you lean left or lean right--the rewards and the challenges of public

service are real, and the capacity to make a real difference is unequalled.

Harry Truman once said that “We can never tell what is in store for us.” I can tell you that while I came to the LBJ School with a passion for social policy, I wouldn’t have dreamed that one day I would be custodian of what I believe to be the most important legacy of the New Deal.

It has been an enormous honor and challenge to serve as Commissioner of Social Security, particularly now, as we stand on the edge of a new century. Particularly now, when our government institutions face such real challenges. And particularly now, as we debate -- again -- what our collective responsibilities are to one another.

The future of Social Security is again at the center of our national discussion, just as it was over a half-century ago.

Today, I am not here to quote line and verse on how to strengthen the Social Security program for future generations. But I will tell you that my own life’s lessons as a public official have made clear that one way to strengthen the fabric of our country is by strengthening our government institutions, such as Social Security...and I will tell you about the pivotal role that skilled and committed individuals -- such as you -- can play in our national life.

President Johnson once said that “you will find meaning only by sharing in the responsibilities, the dangers and the passions of your time.” The history of this century has largely been written by those who have passionately believed in an idea, in a cause...and by those who have devoted their energies to realizing their ideals.

Social Security was created by women and men with that passion for change.

At the turn of this century, in my own home town of Worcester, Massachusetts -- a factory town -- there was a young woman who, when she enrolled in college, thought that she would take the easier courses offered, have a good time and enjoy campus social life.

But she was touched by the struggles of ordinary Americans and the poverty of older Americans, and it didn’t take long until she found that issues larger than herself were paramount. She graduated as class president and went on to become our first female cabinet member and the driving force behind the creation of the Social Security program. That woman was Frances Perkins.

Now, during the very first year that Frances Perkins was Labor Secretary, there was a young college student in Wisconsin with a passion born of the economic struggles of the working class that he grew up with. After college, he went to Washington as a research assistant to the Congressional Committee that was then drafting the original Social Security Act.

In later years, he liked to say that he was the very first employee of the Social Security Administration. That young man was Wilbur Cohen. And, by happenstance, he found his life’s passion. He became the most articulate, most respected spokesperson for progressive

social policy in the country. He went on to become Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, and later in life to serve as Professor here at the LBJ School. He left an enduring mark--not only on Social Security, but in helping President Johnson build the Great Society.

Well, Frances and Wilbur helped to create one heck of an institution for America. Our very first field office in the country opened up in 1936 right here in Austin. It was in the old Post Office Building. We were still four years away from paying the first monthly benefit, and there were only a half dozen, curious visitors to our first office, that very first day in Austin, Texas.

Sixty-three years later, more than 44 million Americans receive monthly Social Security benefits. And each year 26 million Americans visit one of our 1,300 field offices, including our office still located in downtown Austin.

The fabric of the country has been changed by Social Security, as it has by all of our key institutions. And that monthly Social Security check has become the mainstay behind the near eradication of poverty among most of the elderly. It is -- unquestionably -- the most important antipoverty program in our Nation's history. Indeed, if Social Security were gone today, half of all older Americans would be living in poverty tomorrow.

We can and should rejoice in our successes. But this is 1999, not 1936, and Social Security faces some very real pressures, born of continuing demographic changes. When the Social Security program was created in 1935, the average life expectancy of a 65-year-old was 12 ½ years; today it's 17 ½ --and rising.

Within the next thirty years, the number of older Americans will double, placing very real strains on our retirement system.

Will Social Security be there in the future as a solid foundation that can be counted on in retirement? Of course it will, and our Nation's economic strength gives us a real opportunity to strengthen Social Security. But change won't just happen. For those who are serious about governing, we have to confront challenges honestly and directly. And doing so raises tough questions. Will current retirees and members of my generation enjoy a secure retirement? How can we ensure that we don't unfairly burden younger generations? And how do we do so in ways that strengthen the fabric of our society?

And, pragmatically, how do we get from here to there? How do we make sure that we don't just "kick the can down the road" 20 years and wait for those of your generation to handle it?

Not easy questions -- but those are the public questions for our generations to answer.

In any democratic society, the establishment and continuance of any major public institution depends on its ability to win and maintain public support. For a program as important as Social Security, we need broad-based legitimacy -- across generations, across income groups

and over time. Our institutions have to be able to deliver on the big issues of the day.

It's a challenge to each and every one of us in public service, and to all of those who will enter public service careers: how to ensure that our institutions work. That is as true of Social Security as it is for the Texas public school system, or the city of Austin's electric department and all other major public institutions.

I believe all of us in public service need to focus on a number of key areas to strengthen our public institutions:

First, we need the public to be part of our process. Barbara Jordan once observed that "The stakes are much too high for government to be a spectator sport."

She couldn't have been more right. And she couldn't have been more profound.

Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer recently noted that "the Constitution creates a method for making decisions; it then leaves decision-making to the democracy that it creates. For this reason, the Constitution demands participation by the public. And without trust and participation, the Constitution cannot work."

Rey Rodriguez, who is graduating here today, saw public participation firsthand. On his internship last summer, he went with me to Albuquerque, New Mexico to participate in one of President Clinton's national -- and bipartisan -- town hall meetings on the future of Social Security. Americans need to be involved in discussions about the future of our nation's retirement system and our collective responsibilities.

And that's why we at Social Security have held more than 5,000 public education events and media opportunities on the future of Social Security -- joined by people on all sides of the philosophical and age spectrum -- to involve Americans in their future.

Government institutions need to be active in educating the public about critical issues...and encouraging their active participation in the process. But that doesn't happen automatically. It takes hard work, by many people.

Second, our institutions need to meet real needs. And to do so we need an openness to new ideas and a cadre of highly skilled professionals, not only with passion for their field, but also with the skills and abilities to objectively assess options for change to better meet the needs of our citizens.

It reminds me of a young Social Security employee, Sophia Wright, who came to Washington as a Presidential Management Intern after graduating two years ago from the LBJ School. Sophia came to the LBJ School after working with the elderly and the disabled as a claims rep in that little Social Security office in downtown Austin. She is now using the skills that she learned here at the LBJ School to help define how continuing demographic and economic

changes affect the role that Social Security plays in the lives of women. And her work has helped define the policy options available on this issue.

I hope that through our collective efforts -- and her analysis -- that future Social Security Commissioners won't have to say that one in five widows in America still lives in poverty.

So we need the right structure for our programs for the times, designed by skilled people who help to define policy, and we need the public to be part of the process...but we also need more.

Another key to legitimizing our government institutions is quality service to the public. There is a strong correlation between performance and public confidence in government. When we make government work, public confidence and trust in government rises.

Over the last few years, confidence in our institutions has been on the rise. But we still have a long, long way to go. The graduates of public policy and public administration schools have helped agencies strengthen the activities which improve government efficiency, accountability and public service.

That's part of our public trust.

Frankly, we have to provide good service at Social Security. When you get more than 60 million phone calls a year on our 800 number, you'd better be able to answer questions quickly and accurately, and have accountable managers focused on customer service and results.

When you have 44 million Americans counting on that monthly Social Security check to be there -- many who are living month-to-month -- you'd better make darn sure that the Y2K bug won't interrupt those payments, even by a day.

When a million severely disabled children rely on your agency for support, you need to be able to ensure fair, courteous and responsive service to meet their needs.

And with 150 million Americans paying into the system, you need to develop tough but fair anti-fraud and program integrity measures to assure accountability of scarce public resources. And somehow you must find a way to do it all without breaking the bank. That's also part of our public trust.

There is one last area that I believe we need to continue to address. We need to do all that we can to see that our institutions reflect the people that we serve. By the middle of the 21st century, our country will not only be older, it will also have no racial or ethnic majority. No other nation in the world will go through demographic changes of this magnitude in so short a time.

Last year, I participated in a naturalization ceremony in San Antonio. Hundreds of Asians, Africans, Hispanics, Europeans...all becoming Americans. I remember the faces glimmering as a 100-year-old woman from rural Mexico rose -- with assistance from her family -- to take the oath and become America's newest citizen. I was deeply moved.

It really is a wonder that for hundreds of years people from so many different parts of the world can dream of, and then actually become, Americans.

This diverse America is our service population. Whether we are Social Security, the Texas public school system or the city of Austin's electric department, we need our institutions to serve our changing population. And to better serve a more diverse population, we need to become more diverse organizations... to look like America.

I have a picture in my office of President Johnson visiting Social Security headquarters in Baltimore. He's surrounded by a dozen of SSA's top executives, including Wilbur Cohen and Robert Ball. Every one a male...every one white...every one at least middle-aged.

The picture of my agency's leadership is changing. And so are my senior managers and my workforce. But such change does not "just happen." It only happens when men and women of skills and passion and conviction make it happen.

We all need to strengthen our institutions, whether we are administrators of public programs, policy wonks, budget analysts or politicians. Whether we lean left or right. Even if we are private citizens.

A few moments earlier I noted that we now stand on the edge of a new century. I'm sure that the 21st century will prove to be as uncertain as the past century has been. But this I know to be certain: the coming century is YOUR century.

I'll be counting on your generation...we all here will be counting on your generation...to provide the skills and passion and conviction needed to shape the future, to strengthen our institutions, and to serve the public.

In closing, let me again quote President Truman: "We can never tell what is in store for us." When I walked across this stage 21 years ago, I could not have predicted my future -- or my country's future. But I knew I wanted to share in, as President Johnson said, "the responsibilities, the dangers and the passions of our time." And my degree unlocked that door.

Of course, no one can tell what your century holds in store. But when America last stood on the brink of a new century, no one could know that such individuals as Frances Perkins, Wilbur Cohen, Lyndon Johnson, Barbara Jordan -- and so many others -- would follow their life's passion into the public arena and write the destiny of the 20th century.

You can do the same in the coming century. And you will.

To the graduates here today...I'm so proud that you have chosen a life in public service. And

to the guests of the graduates here today -- parents, spouses, loved ones, children -- be very proud of them. They have chosen a path to benefit you--to benefit all of us. We all thank you, the graduates, for choosing this path.