

**The College of William & Mary  
Charter Day  
Saturday, February 9, 2002  
Williamsburg, Virginia  
(as prepared for delivery)**

INTRODUCTION

Good morning.

Let me begin by expressing my thanks to President Sullivan, my friend and a leader whom I greatly admire. And, my sincere gratitude to the Board of Visitors for selecting me for this honor. I also want to extend my congratulations to President Kennedy on receiving his honorary doctorate, and to the Thomas Jefferson award recipients. I am privileged to share the stage with all of you.

I cannot express adequately my great pride in rising today to accept this high honor from my beloved alma mater. I have received recognition for my accomplishments before, but nothing can compare with this day, receiving the highest recognition of my efforts, from the school that gave me the foundation on which those efforts and achievements were built. This institution molded me and inspired my interest in worthy work, service to country and commitment to justice—virtues that guide my decisions each and every day.

FASTER

I have a wonderful job, serving as Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. Every industry we oversee is in the midst of seminal change. These changes are driven by technology and the promise for consumers around the world is breathtaking. I am certainly privileged to have a front row seat at the digital revolution.

You all have felt the reverberations of this profound technology revolution. Have you not sensed that your life is accelerating? Everything is getting faster and faster. You must feel the stress of continual change. James Gleick has written about this phenomenon in his outstanding book Faster: The Acceleration of Just about Everything. Technological advance is responsible for this ever-accelerating pace of life.

Technology has allowed us to begin to master the passage of time. As the 18th century mastered the measurement of mass, and the 19th conquered the measurement of distance, the even ghostlier quantity, time, had to wait for the technologies of the 20th century. Scientists can now measure to a fraction of a nanosecond. Mr. Gleick tells us how precise that really is:

“Within the millisecond, the bat presses against the ball; a rock plunges into a still pond, where the unexpected geometry of the splash pattern pops into existence. During a nanosecond, balls, bullets, and droplets are motionless.”

This time-precision reveals unseen worlds. In the 1870s, for example, no one actually knew whether a trotting horse lifted all four hooves from the ground at any point in its stride. Leland Stanford, for whom Stanford University is named (this example is selected in honor of President Kennedy), hired Eadweard Muybrige to figure it out. It took Mr. Muybrige five years to craft a series of twelve cameras along a track, tripped by wires as the horse ran by, to settle the matter. The technology of photography and shutter speed saw into a world that the human eye could not. The mastery of time extends our natural senses across time and distance.

Communication systems and computers are also creatures that flourish because time precision is harnessed. Communications networks require precise synchronization to transmit and receive electronic signals. Clock speeds of silicon chips have become the new measure of modern life, and the speeds are dizzying, beyond the bounds of our understanding at times.

Michael Malone of Forbes magazine illustrated the power of this point in this statement:

“It is a curious fact that every animal—from the torpid giant tortoise to the frantic housefly—is given as its birthright about 1 billion heartbeats. It is as if every species would have his same threescore and ten, the same span of experiences, no matter how quickly or slowly it was forced to live them.”

“But in the digital, solid-state world that is the new metronome of life, it is a different story. The modern integrated circuit chip will soon be able to perform approximately 1 billion operations per second. One gigahertz. [we have long surpassed this mark coincidentally]. A billion electronic heartbeats: the equivalent of a lifetime in a single second. And, of course, at the end of those billion beats, there won’t be a tiny electronic death but another billion-beat second, and another. And since silicon is incredibly stable and invulnerable to almost everything . . . there will be a billion more of these digital lifetimes for each chip—more than all the generations of life on earth—before it goes dark. Producing whole cosmologies of change that are beyond human comprehension.”

The cracking sound of kilohertz and kilobits, megabits and megahertz, gigahertz and gigabits snaps like a whip at our backs as we race through life. “Hurry up!” “You are wasting time!” “I do not have a moment to spare.” “I haven’t got time for the pain.” We are all heard to say.

Mr. Gleick gives us a wonderful example of our obsession with going faster, through a fun look at elevator engineering. Once upon a time we remember that people, who asked what floor we wanted, captained elevators. You will note today these people have largely vanished from most elevators. You might think elevator operators simply were phased out as too costly, unnecessary, or simply old-fashioned.

The true reason was nothing of the sort. The elevator builders found that the elevator operators slowed things down. It seems they were too polite—holding the door too long for most people’s liking. This ushered in the automatic closing door that was designed to see how hard it could hit someone in order to get the door closed and to get on the move.

An elevator lobby is a great place to observe our impatience. We push the button and wait, but only briefly. You have seen the fruitless gesture of pushing the lighted button again and again—often after only a few seconds. Ask someone who waits for an elevator no more than two minutes how long they have been waiting and they will give you exaggerated times like ten minutes! You know who you are out there.

Technological compression of time is creating a world of immediacy: instant transactions, instant gratification, instant response, and instant opinion formation. We are driven to race through time—we eat minute rice, we jump into express lanes in fast food restaurants, we hit the quick playback button, we watch up to the minute news. This sense of never slowing down makes for a stressed and anxious people. We think we have less leisure time than ever before (not true) and we feel enslaved by the clock. We seem to always be behind and tighten up at every tick of our quartz precision watches.

The servitude we feel and its relationship with technology has been marching down on us for some time. Let me leave this point with the remarks of a NY businessman in a speech lamenting the encroachment on time because of technology:

“The merchant goes home after a day of hard work and excitement to a late dinner, trying amide the family circle to forget business, when he is interrupted by a telegram from London, directing, perhaps, the purchase in San Francisco of 20,000 barrels of flour, and the poor man must dispatch his dinner as hurriedly as possible in order to send his message to California. The businessman of the present day must be continually on the jump, the slow express train will not answer his purpose, and the poor merchant has no other way in which to work to secure a living for his family. He must use the [damn] telegraph.”

We have come a long way from the telegraph, but the feelings expressed then are depressingly modern.

What impact does all this rush and haste and immediacy have on our culture and our society? There are many, but one is the feeling that we live in a temporal, impermanent, provisional, transient, disposable society. “Here today, gone tomorrow.” “Nothing lasts forever.”

Political candidates are all about change—changing by introducing something new, or changing by bringing back something old. In the field of economics the most quoted concept in the techno-era is Joseph Shumpeter’s “Creative Destruction.”

I find this ever-changing world fascinating and exciting. Change can be very good. Technology advance can and does improve our lives. Speed, theoretically, can improve efficiency and yield back time for leisure and reflection, if we would only take it. But one feels inadequate and unsatisfied to some degree in this fleeting, accelerating world—always feeling behind, unfinished with our task, not enough hours in the day. One wonders if there anything left that is venerable, anything that stands the test of time in this crazed ever-changing world.

### AMERICAN IDEAL

The tragic events that occurred on September 11<sup>th</sup> of last year, caused me to think about these questions more deeply. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, our world was shattered by the horrendous and cowardly acts of terrorism that brought down the World Trade Centers and damaged the Pentagon.

I went to New York and visited the devastation shortly after the attacks occurred. The scene was indescribable. Nothing on television captures the magnitude of it all—the enormity of the rubble, the stench of smoke and dust, the muck of water and debris. I have described the scene as somehow pre-historic and surreal. I shivered at the small artifacts of humanity that lie amongst the twisted mass of steel and concrete, like papers and memos, paper clips, and picture frames. Fragments of routine working life strewn amongst a scene that was anything but routine.

The common refrain heard everywhere was that “things will never be the same, America is changed forever.” Those mighty buildings had collapsed and so had some piece of our country. My first thought glancing at the site was that one thing had not changed one bit—evil remained timeless.

As I stared in silence at this monstrosity (all one could really do), my eye slowly was drawn away from the rubble and toward the faces of the ant-sized people working all over the pile. The signs of rebuilding, of starting over. The firemen who had bowed their heads, had now lifted their shovels. The resilience of New Yorkers showed through. And the resolve of all Americans rose from the ashes.

It emerged in my mind that yet another bad-man had misjudged America and her people. They, like Hitler and Hussein before, had seen in our commitment to freedom and individuality, softness. They wrongly saw in our economic prowess a motivation for nothing spiritual but only material. They are emboldened to believe from what they see that we will crumble if our liberty is constrained by terror, or our symbols and objects reduced to rubble. How deeply, deeply wrong they are.

America is an idea that perseveres. She is not affixed to any building. Her heart is not cast in brick, mortar, or steel. Her soul and those of her people are remarkably detached from the symbols and creations that reflect her ingenuity. Americans are

characterized by their strength in making their way of life often out of nothing. We have for centuries ventured into the wilderness and the frontiers of land, sea, air and space to stake our claim.

B.C. Forbes once asked: “What would you call America’s most priceless asset? Surely not its limitless natural resources, not its matchless national wealth, not its unequalled store of gold, not its giant factories, not its surpassing railroads, not its unprecedented volume of cheap power. Is not its most priceless asset the character of its people, their indomitable self-confidence, their transcendent vision, their sleepless initiative and, perhaps above all, their inherent, irrepressible optimism?”

We the People ascend on the wings of our freedom to build community around ideas—one’s so enduring and so eloquently reflected in our declaration of independence, our Constitution, and the many letters home from soldiers abroad. America is not so easily thrown away.

Destruction of our monuments and our buildings is painful but ultimately fruitless, for it cannot even scratch the true pillars on which we stand. To some we are a paradox—we embrace change and race speedily to the future, but our soul is housed in the timeless, unchanging, enduring, venerable principles that form our republic and comprise the fabric of our being.

## CHARTER DAY

On this Charter day, we, too, celebrate a commitment to an ideal that has not and will not change, no matter what time or technology bring. While our pageantry is staged in hallowed halls, and mannered greens, our true commemoration is for the ideas set down hundreds of years ago. It is the value of an education—the pursuit of truth—the great conversation that continues across the centuries about the nature of man and his place in the world.

As I read our Charter the first line gave me the sense that the King and Queen were feeling a bit hurried themselves: “William and Mary, by the grace of God, of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland, King and Queen, Defenders of the Faith, and so forth.”

Our Charter audaciously declares the infinite nature of the ideals on which this institution was set forth: “and being willing, that forever hereafter there should be one such college a place of universal study, and that the said college should subsist and remain in all time coming; of our special grace, certain knowledge, and mere motion, have granted and given leave.... And further we will, and for us, our heirs and successors, by these presents to grant, that when the said college shall be erected, made, founded, and established shall be called and denominated for ever, the College of William and Mary in Virginia. . .”

None of us stood here when this College was chartered, and none of us will stand here 300 years from now. Much will have changed, of course. Who knows what technology will have emerged and how it has changed this campus, or its students and its

faculty. But, I am sure about what will be standing. Our commitment to the timeless ideals set forth in this Royal Charter.

Alexis deTocqueville, in his commentary on Democracy in America, captured how intertwined American ideals, change and education are. He said the Americans, “have all a lively faith in the perfectibility of man, they judge that the diffusion of knowledge must necessarily be advantageous, and the consequences of ignorance fatal; they all consider society as a body in a state of improvement, humanity as a changing scene, in which nothing, or ought to be, permanent; and they admit that what appears to them today to be good, may be superseded by something better tomorrow.”

The College of William and Mary has long been great. Its tomorrow will be better, firmly rooted in her original values. I am proud to have passed her way—even if for only a fleeting moment in time.

Thank You.