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FRONTIERS OF LEARNING: THE WEST AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Cornerstone Saturday

David P. Gardner, President
University of California

Stanford University
May 16, 1987

Thank you, President Kennedy, for your warm welcome and your kind invitation to speak on this singular occasion in Stanford's remarkable history. Your invitation is a notable example of educational statesmanship; indeed, it is one imbued with no small measure of courage when one takes into account that our respective universities occasionally stand in competition one with the other. The first Big Game, for example, took place in San Francisco in 1892. Fifteen thousand persons attended. In the excitement of the moment, neither team remembered to bring the football (or was it that each hoped the other would incur the cost of doing so?) and willing parties were dispatched downtown to buy one. While the win-loss record of that venerable tradition is one relentlessly subject to interpretation and certainly to annual modification, I am relieved that athletics is not the focus of today's event, and that my role is simply to bring the friendly, respectful, and warm greetings of the University of California--now grown to nine campuses--and our special greetings to the Stanford Band and its unique brand of football.

In keeping with the theme of this celebration, I intend to talk about the West and higher education. The West is a term that needs both definition and elaboration, as each of us tends to

have our own ideas about its meaning and significance. Having lived nearly all of my life in California and the Rocky Mountains, I have come to see Denver as the break point between the West and what lies to the east. Should one regard that line as the uncommon reflection of a profound provincialism, it is at least geographically a more arguable boundary than one drawn by our fellow citizens on the East coast. When bringing greetings from the Nation's public universities to Harvard on the occasion of its 350th birthday celebration last September, I noted that with the single exception of the President of Yale, who had journeyed to Cambridge from that western outpost of New Haven, I was the only one speaking who hailed from the vast hinterlands and little-known provinces lying west of the Charles River.

All of which suggests that the West is as much a state of mind as it is a place. And it is about the West in this context that I will offer my remarks. I will take California for my illustrations, however, not only because we are here but also because, in the words of one historian, "In California the West has come to focus."

Where does one begin? Many places if one wishes, but I would like to begin with the 1890s--when Stanford University was taking its first steps--and with three individuals whose lives and writings help make the principal points of my remarks this morning.

The first is John Muir. Conservationist and prophet, he founded the Sierra Club in 1892, along with a few like-minded friends, and devoted his life to conserving the West's special places. Not everyone shared his near-mystical sense of the unity and significance of nature. But he sparked an awareness of the West as a unique physical environment more easily destroyed and less readily retrieved than imagined by those who, in the sweep and scale of the West, plotted their course and actions as though this vast land knew no bounds.

It was no accident that the environmental movement began in the West, or that the National Parks movement had its genesis here as well: The vast and living deserts of Nevada and the Southwest, the great forests of the Northwest, the soaring ranges and glacial valleys of the Rocky Mountains, the mesas of Utah's Four Corners and Monument Valley, the wild rivers, California's Sierra Nevada, the Grand Canyon, and the singularly spectacular Pacific coastline--these treasures of the West continue to actuate and help define our national ethos. Muir's distinctive contribution was to call vivid attention to their importance and their vulnerability.

A year after the founding of the Sierra Club, at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner drew attention to another aspect of the West. He presented his celebrated essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"--they had

different ideas of fun in those days--and sparked a revolution in American historical thought.

Turner's argument was simple and powerful. The frontier, he said, was decisive in shaping American life and the American character. The first frontier, of course, was the Atlantic Coast. From early colonial settlements, the march westward began, flowing in stages to the Piedmont, to and through the Allegheny Mountains, the Mississippi River, the Missouri River, the Rocky Mountains, and finally to California and the West coast. I do not mean to exclude Texas. Every part of the country, therefore, has in the short course of our history been the frontier, and at some time has been "the West."

Turner believed that the frontier had provoked and nurtured several fundamental aspects of American life. First, it encouraged a composite nationality by drawing individuals from different countries and different cultures and acting as a crucible in which most immigrants were "Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race."

Second, it continually renewed and revitalized American democracy because the rugged circumstances of frontier life demanded an individualism and self-reliance that only a high degree of personal freedom and a rough equality would permit. These became preeminent values, for they were the ones that permitted one to

survive at the edge of civilized society and on the borders of an advancing frontier.

Third, frontier life engendered what Turner called "intellectual traits of profound importance." Among them were "acuteness and inquisitiveness;" "that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things... that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom--these are the traits of the frontier..."

"America has been another name for opportunity," he concludes, "and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them." The closing of the frontier, reflected in the Census of 1890, was for Turner the closing of a chapter in American life. "American energy," he said, "will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves....What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States... ."

Turner's theory has been applauded, attacked, and expanded, but it has not been displaced as a seminal and engaging explanation of the United States developing as a succession of frontiers,

continually advancing westward, halted only by the Western border of the continent lying less than an hour's drive from us this morning. We tend today to think of the West mostly in terms of California and the other Western states because it is our region of the country that has most recently been the frontier.

The West as offering "new experiences...[and] new institutions and activities" was certainly uppermost in the minds of those who founded its schools, colleges and universities. Leland Stanford, as I need not remind this audience, set out to break the educational mold of the Eastern universities and create something distinctively Western. Turner would not have been surprised to hear that Stanford intended his university to offer "practical education." The reason, Stanford said, was that "Of all the young men who come to me with letters from friends, the most helpless class are college young men." Surely, these could not have been coming from Berkeley!

David Starr Jordan--the first President of Stanford University and the third individual I want to discuss--was the remarkable man chosen to transform the Stanford dream into reality. He was in accord with Stanford's views that education should be useful. But he also believed that the liberal studies had a place, too; and his more inclusive view prevailed. "The two great lines of work," he said, "the Liberal Arts and Sciences...and the Applied Sciences [should] be both provided for from the first." And they were.

And so too was provision for faculty research--something that ran counter to the prevailing trends of the 1890s, when professors carried dauntingly heavy teaching loads. Moreover, Jordan expected that research results would be published. He regarded teaching and research not as enemies but as allies, one reinforcing and informing the other in the cause of learning. He was right.

Women as well as men were expected to be educated at Stanford. This was a distinctively Western attitude; some would have thought it peculiar as well in those days. Coeducation took hold sooner in the West than in other parts of the country, as did the elective franchise for women, first in Wyoming and then in Utah, because Western society was one whose rigors demanded of both sexes a sharing in any and every responsibility. Jane Stanford's involvement in the university, before and after her husband's death, was entirely in keeping with that spirit.

Jordan's faith, despite all obstacles, that it was possible to build a great university in California's new and seemingly rootless society is reminiscent of President Daniel Coit Gilman's ambitious hopes for the young University of California two decades earlier. Both of these men believed--as perhaps only those attracted to the empty and limitless vistas of the West could--that human effort and aspiration could achieve a vibrant and learned community without having to wait for centuries of tradition to sustain it. In a society predicated on "drought and

distance," as one historian has put it, their vision must have seemed improbable at best, foolhardy at worst.

Success was not a foregone conclusion. Many of the leaders in the West, like Leland Stanford, were not college-educated and were skeptical about the more classically oriented forms of higher education. But Westerners believed in education as well as in training, and not just in higher education but in elementary and secondary education as well. Moreover, they were willing to support it. Thus, education in the West, public and private alike, was encouraged and, from the first, nurtured. Perhaps because they grew up together, public and private colleges and universities in the West, in stark contrast to the East, have cultivated a spirit of cooperation as well as a healthy competition; and I believe that it is altogether accurate to say that neither Stanford nor the University of California would be what each is today were it not for the other.

Today California has a system of private and public colleges and universities that, taken together, are unmatched in the world. They have managed to combine broad access with high academic standards as no society has similarly done. California's 430 colleges and universities enroll 735,000 full-time and 1,000,000 part-time students; college graduates make up 20 percent of California's adult population, compared with 16 percent nationally. Of the 100 Nobel Prizes awarded to Americans between 1959 and 1985, roughly 25 percent were awarded to faculty members in

California's universities. The University of California and Stanford are consistently ranked among the very best in the nation for the quality of their graduate programs and the quality and promise of their research. More Federal research and development funds go to California and other Western states than to any other region of the country. And as Turner might well have predicted, innovation has flourished here--and not just in the development of what we euphemistically call alternative lifestyles!

The West, of course, is no longer a geographical frontier. It has been explored, settled, and developed, and today it is faster and easier to get from San Francisco to New York than it was to get from San Francisco to Monterey in the pioneer days. On certain days and at certain times, I think the pioneers found it easier than I do to travel from San Francisco to Monterey. At least they did so on a fast horse over open country rather than as we do today, in our fast automobiles moving slowly over crowded roads.

But the West is still a frontier in many forms of human endeavor. It is here that we first learned to split the atom and the human gene. It is here that some of the most exciting and fundamental developments in electronics, in medicine, in bioscience, and in the physical sciences have taken place; and it is here that some of the most creative and imaginative work in the arts and humanities is occurring. The American energy that Turner saw as

demanding steadily wider scope bubbles up in endless forms, from the trivial to the profound, in this, America's last frontier.

And within the context of the West, California has a unique place. It is more than simply an extension of Western society to the Pacific edge of this continent. From very early on it has been a frontier where East and West in the larger sense--Orient and Occident--have met and mingled. Daniel Coit Gilman's 1872 inaugural address as President of the University of California recognized this explicitly and prophetically:

California is not only granary, treasury, and mart for the American States which are growing up on this long coast, but it is the portal through which the occident and the orient must exchange their products and their thoughts.... A new epoch in history seems opening before us.... Modern civilization has bordered the Atlantic. Now, face to face, with the great Pacific Ocean intervening, are the oldest and the youngest forms of human society.

"We cannot be too quick," he added, "to prepare for the possible future which may open upon us."

Gilman's "possible future" has arrived. California today is a crossroads where the cultures of East and West meet; and out of that meeting something unique is being born. From a California

perspective, the Pacific Ocean is not the defining limit of the frontier but a bridge over which people, trade, and ideas have flowed into this state from the Far East--which is, if one thinks about it, California's Near West. And of course California has been a magnet not just for people from the Far East and East Asia but from other locations along the Pacific Rim as well--Southeast Asia, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand and Latin America. These forces have combined to create a dynamic, fluid, unsettled and unsettling society, somewhat rootless and open, crowded and sometimes lonely, overflowing with opportunity, changing, contentious, and infused with energy and creativity. And California's economy, measured in the value of goods produced and services rendered, is surpassed only by six nations, and by the turn of the century is expected to be exceeded only by three.

The rise of internationally distinguished public and private universities in what was a raw frontier society as recently as 125 years ago is startling enough. But perhaps even more startling is the possibility that California, at the Western edge of the continent, the terminus of a relentless Western movement of the frontier in American life, and the recipient of ideas and peoples from the nations of the Pacific Rim, will not be so much the last frontier for America as the beginning of a new one. But it will be a different kind of frontier--not one rooted in geography but in the cultural, economic, social, and political life of this state, whose strategic position in what will be the Pacific Century and whose influence as the hub of these forces

may well be as pervasive and profound as was that of the Western frontier a century and more ago. Circumstances have combined to offer California very special opportunities and very special responsibilities. By virtue of its geography, its economy, its history, its character, and its wealth, California is fitted to play a pivotal role in what will surely be one of the greatest centers of trade, commerce, and cultural exchange the world has ever known. And as has been true in the past, education will be the key to unlocking both this state's future and the role it will play in the United States and on the world's stage.

It is a formidable challenge. For example, it is estimated that during the 1970s approximately eight million legal and illegal immigrants crossed our borders, many of them from Pacific Rim countries--Mexico, Central and South America, East and South Asia. Nearly one-third of these newcomers settled in California. By the year 2000, California's population is expected not only to increase from its current 26 million to 33 million, but also to consist of nearly one-half ethnic and racial minorities, chiefly Hispanic and Asian. California's schools, colleges, and universities have enrolled and will continue to enroll these newcomers, helping them to take their place in the mainstream of American society. But we must devote greater care than we have heretofore to this segment of our population, as we also must to others who have talent and contributions to make if but given an education and a chance to perform on an even playing field, regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender.

The values that Turner saw as blossoming under the pressures of life on the frontier--democracy, individualism, inventiveness, personal freedom--have come to stand for something that is not just distinctively Western but distinctively American: opportunity. Like Stanford and Gilman, Muir and Jordan, the newcomers who arrive in California today come here seeking opportunity. Some will be disappointed, just as some of the early pioneers were disappointed, and sought their opportunities elsewhere. But most will find here a richer and fuller life than the one they left.

Higher education in such a setting does not lack for opportunities. In an essay called "Pioneer Ideals," Frederick Jackson Turner talks about the role of the university in a post-frontier world. "The university has a duty in adjusting pioneer ideals to the new requirements of American democracy....The early pioneer was an individualist and a seeker after the undiscovered; but he did not understand the richness and complexity of life as a whole...it is the function of the university to reveal to the individual the mystery and glory of life as a whole--to open all the realms of rational human enjoyment and achievement; to preserve the consciousness of the past; to spread before the eye the beauty of the universe; and to throw wide its portals of duty and power to the human soul."

The Stanford family today celebrates the flowering of a seed planted a century ago by two people who experienced personal

tragedy and out of it created a brilliant and enduring legacy, faithful to the pioneer ideals of the West. "The children of California shall be our children," Leland Stanford is reported to have said, but even he could not have guessed how rich in promise and achievement that decision was to be. Happy birthday, Stanford. May you celebrate each year, forever.