

“Reflections of the University President”

Dr. Philip C. Williams

On the Occasion of his Investiture to the Office of President

Bulber Auditorium

McNeese State University

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Thank you.

Your hospitality to Sandra, Grant, and me over the past few months has been heartwarming and nothing short of amazing. I have now gained fifteen pounds, and each new pound has been packed with a lifetime of hospitality. Fortunately, my doctor has assured me that I can lose the weight without losing any of the goodwill that was attached to it.

I'd like to begin my remarks today by thanking the members of the Inauguration Committee, which included Sarah Hogan, Toby Osburn, Joyce Patterson, Candace Townsend, George Bodin, Jeanne Daboval, Jonathan Rutherford, Melissa Northcutt, Michael Graham, and Ray Miles. These dedicated people formed subcommittees that included students, faculty, and staff too numerous to name, and took charge of responsibilities relating to the format of this ceremony, public communications, the reception that we will enjoy in a few minutes, guest relations, logistics, and technology. Volunteers have been working for weeks and are all over campus today, working behind the scenes to make all of us feel comfortable and welcome. Please join me in expressing our gratitude to these wonderful people.

I also want to express special thanks to Dr. Hebert for his assistance to me during the transition. Because of his unselfish commitment to McNeese, I have inherited a strong administrative team and an institutional financial structure uniquely positioned to weather the economic storm we are experiencing. Maybe it was his leadership during Hurricane Rita that caused him to take such a prudent and farsighted approach to this institution's financial health. Or maybe he's just a financial genius. Either way, our students, faculty, and staff—and this new president—are all benefiting from the difficult and in some cases unpopular budget measures he put into place months before the markets crashed. Thank you, Bob.

One important member of his administrative team that I inherited is Dr. Jeanne Daboval, whose sense of dedication and love for this university has led to an uncommonly smooth transition. She is the consummate professional, one who would rather sacrifice her own time and resources than see any harm come to this university. I am proud to have her serving on my team as Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs.

I would also like to thank the transition team that was chaired by our Chief Financial Officer, Eddie Meche. Eddie has been a key player in the maintenance of our fiscal integrity and strength during this financial crisis. The

transition team also included Richard Reid, our Vice President for Development, who, along with Joyce Patterson, our Alumni Director, made sure that Sandra, Grant, and I were introduced to all the right people. They were joined by Richard Rhoden, our Director of Facilities and Plant Operations; Candace Townsend, our Director of Public Relations; and Sandra Marceaux, who served as my Executive Assistant handling all sorts of unique issues that only arise when there is a changing of the guard. Keep in mind that these individuals were not only working a full day to accomplish the routine tasks required in their normal workdays. They were spending their own personal time handling a host of additional responsibilities for a new president. And yet they were always responsive, always cheerful, always putting the interests of this university first.

I also inherited from Dr. Hebert a campus community of talented faculty, staff, students, and alumni—including many of you who are here in this audience today. You have demonstrated time after time your commitment to McNeese, through your sacrifice of time, talent, and treasure under circumstances that would have daunted lesser individuals.

When I watched the performance of Hurricane Kaleidoscope by the McNeese Bayou Players, I wondered whether this remarkable community spirit might have grown out of this region's responses to hurricanes like Audrey, Rita, and Ike. All I know is that when I asked the campus community to assist me in finding ways to address the serious financial challenges we will be facing in next year's budget, everyone pitched in to help. Folks here just seem to know how to pull together during tough times. I can tell you as an outsider that it is extremely heartening to work among such selfless and committed people.

It is also heartening to work in a community where business leaders are visionary and progressive; where our graduates can look forward to being involved not only in the exciting developments taking place at the Port of Lake Charles, at Chenault International Airport and Lake Charles Regional Airport, and near the beautiful new lakefront promenade downtown, but in the joint development of a business incubation center and the dream of a national hurricane museum and science center. This is truly a remarkable community of visionary leaders.

In that same vein, I want to thank the donors here in this auditorium and those who could not be with us today, who have funded activities and events that would simply not have happened without your generosity, including funding for this ceremony and the reception we will enjoy in few minutes. I have been dumbfounded by those of you donors—and you know who you are—who help so much and yet seek no part of the limelight. I have honestly never experienced this level of selfless generosity in my life.

Speaking of generosity, there are with us today some personal friends of mine, a few of whom have traveled great distances to be with us. It is a rare privilege for me to recognize them today, since they represent milestones in my academic career. (Now, when I use the word "milestone," I don't mean to say that these are hard-headed people. I mean that my friendship with them defines important moments in my life's journey.) If you will indulge me for a moment, I'd like to introduce a few of these "milestone-people" who continue to mean so much to me.

Of course, I begin by introducing my wife, Sandra and my son, Grant. Will you please stand and wave? Sandra and Grant have been my travel companions and life companions as well as my confidantes and advisors on this wonderful adventure. We have also been joined for the past ten years by our Chihuahua-terrier mix, Zorro. Zorro asked me to pass along two complaints: the first being the fact that I would not allow him to attend this ceremony, and the second being the fact that, because of our move to Southwest Louisiana, he has been forced to change the spelling of his name to Z-O-R-R-E-A-U.

Sandra and Grant are joined today by Sandra's sister, Wendy Garrett and her friend, Rudy Rudolph along with Sandra's stepmother Liane Garrett and Liane's cousin, Bobbi Burton. Could you all please stand?

When I went to work at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta on a post-doctoral research fellowship following my PhD work in Chapel Hill, there was a fellow named Bob Gerzoff whose office was across the hall from mine. I quickly learned that Bob was our statistics guru and that I could count on him to debug complex algorithms and formulas when I was having trouble. Bob met and married Qaiser Mukhtar a few years after I left that office. She also works at the CDC and, no offense Bob, but I think you got the better end of that deal. Bob and Qaiser are both still there in fields of statistical analysis and research at the CDC, keeping us healthy. Bob and Qaiser, could you please stand and wave?

You've already heard from Dr. Gil Blackburn, who insists on saying nice things about me after all these years. Dr. Blackburn offered me my first job as a faculty member at Gardner-Webb University. Almost everything I learned that was useful about academic administration I learned from him. If I have any gifts as a leader, it is because I had an unusually brilliant and patient mentor. But we all know that behind every great man is an even greater woman. With Gil today is his wife, our good friend Martha Blackburn. Martha, could you please stand?

After I left Gardner-Webb, I became Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College at Methodist University in Fayetteville, NC. What's interesting about these next two individuals is that they both hail from the nation of India. Dr. Sid Gautam is Executive Director of the Center for Entrepreneurship at Methodist University in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and I plan to pick his brain as we develop our S.E.E.D. center here at McNeese. Dr. Narendra Singh is Chair of the Department of Chemistry and Physical Sciences at Methodist University and a leader in the cause of high academic standards and integrity there. Sid and Narendra were great supporters and friends of mine while I worked at Methodist University and I feel proud and humbled that they have traveled so far to be with us today. Sid and Narendra, will you please stand?

And finally, we come to the most recent milestone in my journey to Southwest Louisiana. As most of you know, I spent the last four years of my career at the University of Montevallo in Alabama. When I arrived at Montevallo, the person who was in charge of that inauguration—Marion Brown—was someone who quickly became my go-to person for everything related to university logistics, events, sensitive confidential issues, and just about every other topic where I needed advice. My assistant, Sarah Hogan, has asked me to add the fact that Marion also served as her mentor as well. Marion is here today as the University of Montevallo's official delegate and she is joined in the audience by Montevallo students Andrew Fancher and Leslie Fowlkes. Marion, Andrew, and Leslie, could the three of you please stand?

Not far from the entrance to this auditorium, about 50 yards this side of the newly dedicated sculpture of John McNeese, there stands another milestone. This one is a monument that would be easy to ignore unless you read all the way to the bottom. At the top of the bronze inscription are the words “McNeese State College, First Graduating Class to Receive Degrees, 1952.” The monument goes on to list the name of President Frazar along with the names of the authors of the Legislative Act which transformed McNeese State College into a four-year institution—names that included Senators Hennigan and Sockrider, and Representatives Futrell, Hargrove, Jones, Meaux, and Vallee—all important champions in the history of this university. This was all historically significant. But what startled me was the inscription that follows: “Attorneys who successfully defended the legislative act establishing McNeese State College: E. R. Kaufman, Cullen R. Liskow, Alvin O. King, Sam H. Jones, and Vance Plauche.” I don’t know about you, but I practiced as an attorney for 17 years and I don’t recall ever seeing a monument to a committee of attorneys.

Why, then, did the McNeese community find it fitting to honor a committee of attorneys in this way? The answer, of course, is that the history of McNeese State University—going back to the life of John McNeese himself—is a history of commitment to higher education against all odds. The legislative delegation from this community had to persuade and cajole and twist the arms of other legislators in the state to pass the legislation that brought a university to this site. And before the ink was dry on that legislation, a committee of attorneys had to fight to defend the constitutionality of that statute. Our current fiscal challenges pale in comparison with the challenges faced by the champions of McNeese in those days, when the very survival of a fledgling college was in doubt.

In that regard, I am pleased that members of our current legislative delegation are with us here today. All of these public servants have been fighting for years in Baton Rouge and Washington, D.C. on behalf of McNeese State University. It is my understanding that in addition to Senator Dan Morrish, we have with us today Senator Willie Mount, State Representatives Chuck Kleckley, Mike Danahay, and John Guinn; and from United States Senator Mary Landrieu’s office Mr. Mark Herbert [and from Senator David Vitter’s office Ms. Courtney Guastella.] and from Congressman Boustany’s office Mr. Joe Hill. Would all of you please stand?

I would like to express my personal appreciation for the support of our Board of Regents led by Chairman Terrell, our Board of Supervisors led by Chairman Sibile, by our own regional Supervisor, Carl Shetler, and the support of the University of Louisiana System president, Dr. Randy Moffett, and Vice President Dr. Brad O’Hara. [Brad, I believe you are here with us in the audience, could you please stand?] And I would be remiss if I did not mention the fact that Tom Burnett, Commissioner of the Southland Athletic Conference traveled all the way from Frisco, Texas (near Dallas) to be with us here this weekend and Mayor Ron Roberts drove all the way down from DeRidder to be with us here today. Tom and Ron, would you please stand?

I will not ask others to stand, and I know I’m already in trouble because I’ve missed some wonderful people here today representing business, civic, parish, city, and cultural organizations. I hope you will forgive me if I missed you because you snuck in the side door or because I am new here and still learning names. But I can say this about all of you here in this audience. Your presence here today underlines the generous nature of your commitment to our students and the importance of the role played by McNeese in the economy of the Southwest Louisiana Region. You know that our system of Higher Education is not broken. Students from all over the world come to this nation

and to the University of Louisiana System to seek higher education. They come because the system of higher education in the United States is the envy of the world. Here at McNeese, a student wishing to become a nurse, a physician, a dentist, radiologist, teacher, scientist, engineer, forensic specialist, farmer, accountant, business executive, economist, government official, community leader, or a candidate for a Ph.D. at a research institution cannot hope for a better preparation in life.

Last month, I attended a meeting of the Calcasieu Parish Board of Education. At that meeting, awards were being given for the teachers of the year in elementary, middle school, and high school education. Three awards were given at each level: second runner up, first runner up, and Teacher of the Year. Imagine the pride I felt as the new President here at McNeese when it was pointed out to me by Superintendent of Schools Wayne Savoy that all nine award recipients were educated right here in the McNeese State University College of Education.

Yet we in America have developed the rather perverse habit—in the name of continuous quality improvement—of criticizing our own successes so strenuously that we sometimes risk killing the goose that laid the golden egg. Continuous quality improvement and constructive criticism are good things. We should always be looking to improve the way we learn and the way we teach. But I, for one, am extremely proud of the legacy of this great university which will be looking forward to its 75th anniversary in just a few short years, and I have every reason to believe that the great successes that have been achieved by the loyal employees right here in this room will strengthen and grow to even greater heights in years to come. If there are those who believe higher education is broken, let them come to McNeese!

Earlier this semester I asked campus leaders to conduct a thorough institutional review of every program and service we perform and to identify cuts to match the magnitude of the challenge we will be facing next year. These leaders of our faculty, students, and staff—and I am talking to many of you here in this room today—could have shirked your responsibility by responding with blame and complaints. You could have pointed to another department, saying “Cut them, not me.” Instead, you responded with creativity and a sense of shared responsibility. You identified efficiencies, you recommended savings where they would be least painful and most effective, and we will be able, because of your commitment to this great institution, to move forward through these difficult times—not with an attitude of sullen recrimination but with a spirit of mutual respect borne of shared sacrifice and selfless commitment to educational excellence with a personal touch. Because of your hard work, I will be able to announce, this coming week, the first draft of a proposed reorganization of administrative personnel and services that will not only address our financial challenges but also protect our talented people while continuing to put our students first.

Your creativity in that regard is consistent with my vision for McNeese as a center for innovation and entrepreneurial leadership serving not only this Imperial Calcasieu region but all of Louisiana and her surrounding neighbors. Last spring, Dr. Hebert led the dedication of the new Shearman Fine Arts Center. Last month I was privileged to participate with him in the groundbreaking ceremony for the new S.E.E.D. center—an incubator not only for new businesses, but for innovations of all kinds. What a privilege it is to be working in an environment where voices of doom and gloom are overcome by voices of confidence and hope; where attitudes of cynicism are met not with panic and defeat, but with positive achievements and ever higher expectations. I view the S.E.E.D. center as the ideal manifestation of a much broader vision for McNeese—a vision which calls on the university to

serve as a breeding ground for innovation involving all six colleges; where entrepreneurship can involve business partnering with the liberal arts, engineering partnering with nursing, science partnering with teacher education, and all the permutations and combinations of partnerships among colleges and disciplines and departments we could imagine; where future students come to McNeese because we are the place that embraces a type of interdisciplinary excitement that can't be found anywhere else.

We must remind ourselves that, unlike the challenges faced by that committee of attorneys in 1939, the challenges we face today are only fiscal, not existential. I have inherited from Dr. Hebert all the right people, all the infrastructure, and all the will power needed to succeed in this new vision. Our beloved university, like a virtual aircraft, is positioned on the runway with clearance from the tower to take off. We have the collective talent to fuel our aircraft and the will to lift it into the ionosphere. As we experience that lift off together, and as we rise higher and higher above the clouds, we may begin to notice that the brightness of the sky begins to deepen to a richer shade. I can think of only two words that can capture that beautiful color. And those two words are Geaux Blue!