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ADDRESS BY CONGRESSMAN WILLIAM D. FORD

AT

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN WINTER COMMENCEMENT

DECEMBER 19, 1982

— A CHALLENGE FOR OUR TIMES —

It is a distinct honor to appear before you today. I want to thank President Shapiro for inviting me. I also want to thank the Law School for its generous gesture in awarding me its honorary doctor of laws degree. I accept it with gratitude and humility.

For those of you who are leaving this magnificent institution and going out into a world beset with economic turmoil, I feel a sense of compassion. It is mixed, however, with a good measure of envy. To meet the challenges of our times, you are armed with youthful and intellectual vigor and the benefit of a superior education.

Today we are in the throes of severe economic upheaval. Not only are we experiencing the worst recession since the dark days of the 1930s, but fundamental and lasting changes are being forged in our economy.

The mighty production engine that lifted America to manufacturing preeminence has faltered. More than 30 percent of the nation's factories and plants are idle. The figure is much higher in several key industries — including automobiles and steel.

o Across the nation more than 12 million workers are jobless — nearly 11 percent of the workforce. The figure is higher if we include the millions who have given up looking for work in discouragement and millions more who are unable to find full-time employment.

o Business failures are at a post-Depression high.

o Since 1979 net income for American farmers has dropped nearly 50 percent and thousands of farm families have been forced to sell their land at depressed prices.

o World-wide the banking system is in serious trouble.

The economic dilemma is not peculiar to America. Other nations of the free world are experiencing almost identical problems.

Recently, Lester C. Thurow, professor of economics and management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said that what will be needed to pry the free world out of this economic mire is a "new burst of intellectual creativity."

I believe he is right. And if history is any guide, that new creative explosion will germinate in the minds of young thinkers and doers who have benefited from quality instruction.

I hope that some of you will consider careers in government. There is a tremendous need in government at all levels for young people with talent and dedication. That need will grow in the years ahead as we adjust to what is happening in the world economy.

There are those in positions of influence today who want to diminish the role of government. They contend that government is the problem. Certainly there are problems in government. But from my vantage point, government clearly must be part of the solution.

Those who advocate a return to pure laissez-faire have failed to learn from the past. And they do not see the future clearly.

If not government, who will:

o Assist those who are displaced in the economic upheaval we are now going through and prepare them for meaningful lives with dignity?

o Ensure that we have an adequate supply of trained technical and professional workers to meet the demands of an uncertain future?

The world is now on the threshold of unbelievable technological and scientific advancement. The future will be fraught with dramatic surprises. The enormous strides we have made in a short period in the fields of electronics, science, medicine and engineering surely will pale in the face of what is to come.

Computers are still in their infancy. Yet we can store thousands of bits of information on silicon chips a quarter of an inch square and wafer thin. It is possible that before long we will be able to store infinitely more information on a single molecule of matter. The implications of such advancement staggers the imagination.

These dramatic breakthroughs are inevitable. The question is whether America will be ready — whether we will be able to capitalize on the coming wonders or whether we will fall behind.

If we are to succeed — to recapture a superior position in world economic affairs — we cannot falter in our dedication to education. America's greatness is the end result of a social philosophy that placed a high premium on education and guaranteed its availability to the rich and poor alike.

This is no time to renege on that commitment.

There are those who say we can no longer afford public investment in human resources. Nothing could be more myopic. We cannot afford not to.

Where will we be if we succeed in expanding our arsenal of military hardware only to find our technology obsolete or our workforce inadequate? Where will we be if we don't have the trained minds and skilled hands to guide us through the new age that is dawning?

After World War II, the GI Bill made it possible for millions of Americans who otherwise would have been denied a college education to become professionals. The unprecedented economic growth and technological improvement over the last three decades would not have been possible without a vast pool of college trained managers, engineers and scientists. The millions who took advantage of the GI Bill contributed substantially to this pool.

Today, without question, the economies of the world are in transition. Economic societies are shifting and changing at a frightening pace. We will have to wait for the dust to settle before we know precisely how deep and permanent these shifts will be. But we cannot afford not to be ready.

To say that government should play a reduced role in such a critical period is shortsighted. Only government has the wherewithal — the resources — to deal with the enormity of the problem. And only the people have the interest of the whole. The best-managed corporations in America will, by their very nature, be motivated by self-interests. No longer can we rely on the invisible hand.

With the exigencies so clear, it dismays me to see what is happening in the area of higher education.

Students, including the best and brightest and our best hope for the future, are applying to less expensive schools because they are unable to get assistance.

A recent Harvard study shows that the number of applications it received from students whose parents did not go to college has declined by more than a third in the last three years.

Less affluent students, their ability notwithstanding, are taking themselves out of competition for the best schools. What could be more tragic?

America is only as good as the educational opportunities afforded its young people. This is why I have cosponsored every significant education bill since and including the Higher Education Act of 1965 and authored the Middle Income Student Assistance Act, which provided Federal assistance to virtually all college students.

Sadly, as a result of prolonged recession and misguided Federal policies, state-supported colleges and universities are in serious trouble today.

To make matters worse, a large proportion of students who attend public colleges and universities come from low-income families, those hardest hit by today's adverse economic conditions.

Here in Michigan, the recession has been especially severe. By definition, in fact, it is a depression. Consequently, state revenues have fallen and outlays for higher education have declined. At the same time, there has been a reduction in Federal assistance.

It does not seem fair to me that young people in Michigan should suffer a disproportionate share of the national economic grief. But, sadly, this is what is happening.

As great as it is, the University of Michigan has not escaped the fallout from the present economic crisis. And, without help from someone, its very future as a paramount university is in jeopardy, along with Michigan's two other leading universities — Michigan State and Wayne State.

They are in danger of falling behind in national standing if they fail to get adequate financing.

Should this happen, it would deal a devastating blow to the state's chances for economic recovery. The University of Michigan, along with the other schools, is a valuable state asset. Should it decline in standing, its value also would diminish. The State of Michigan, beset by so many other woes, could not stand such a loss.

Somehow we as a nation must find answers to the present dilemma. At both the state and national level we all must rededicate ourselves to the principle of educational opportunity with a renewed emphasis on quality. We cannot afford to do otherwise.

If we fail, we place the future of America in great danger. We cannot expect to maintain our status as a first-class nation if we allow our higher education system to become second class.

To meet the problem, we do indeed need an infusion of fresh ideas. We need as well to protect an education philosophy that has served us well and allowed us to achieve greatness.

This is the challenge of our times. It is your challenge.