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REFLECTIONS ON RECEIVING THE CLARK KERR MEDAL

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Berkeley, California

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This award recognizes a lasting gift the Berkeley faculty has made to the University of California and American higher education—namely, the leadership and legacy of Clark Kerr. For many of us, both are crystallized in his 1963 Godkin Lectures. Few writers on any subject have distilled so much thought and insight into a mere ninety-five pages. The lectures were published in book form—*The Uses of the University*—and were further enriched by a series of reflections and reconsiderations Kerr added to later editions. He had a remarkable ability to describe the broad evolution of the American research university without losing touch with the essential subplots. In reading over the fifth and last edition, I was struck by his division of the history of the research university into four stages.

The initial two stages cover 130 years—from 1810 to 1940. The first (1810-1870) is defined by the growing influence of German ideas about higher education (brought back by Americans who had studied there) and by the 1862 Land-Grant College Act. Early in the second stage (1870-1940), the triumph of the German research university model is established with the founding of Johns Hopkins University in 1876. Research at public and private universities grows at a very gradual pace during this stage—teaching remains the primary faculty responsibility.

The third stage—the fifty years from 1940 to 1990—encompasses the research university's expansion in students, faculty, academic quality, and engagement with society. Near the end of World War II, Roosevelt asks his science adviser, Vannevar Bush, for a plan on how to organize science in the post-war era. Bush's 1945 report, *Science: The Endless Frontier,* lays the foundation for what has become the nation's science policy. A key feature of the policy is that American research universities are assigned principal responsibility for the conduct of the nation's basic research. What follows is the establishment of the National Science Foundation and the reorganization of the National Institutes of Health and other federal agencies to provide extramural grants and contracts for university research. The federal government's massive investment in both research and education continues, with some fluctuations, throughout the third stage. It is the high point of a golden age for research universities that Kerr felt was destined never to return.

This brings us to his final stage—1990 to the present day. Kerr characterizes it, with some understatement, as "an era of constrained resources." This is our era, one whose contours we know all too well, and the one I want to talk about. I don't intend to present a comprehensive vision of what these years have meant for the

University of California or what the future holds. Instead I want to offer a few observations on some of the encouraging, worrisome, or surprising developments of this period as it looks to me today, 15 years after I stepped down as president. My list includes seven topics (for cognitive psychologists like me who study memory, seven is a magic number).

First, as I'm sure you've noticed, we have been through some very bad times together. The nation's recovery from the depths of the 2008 recession continues strong. Yet Federal and State funding for universities has not recovered accordingly. What looked like a fiscal crisis of limited duration in 2008 now looks like a new steady state. Unless current trends change, ten years from now there will be many universities that can no longer call themselves research universities. It goes without saying that the University of California will not be one of them. We have faculty leadership to thank for that. No faculty in the country has compiled a more brilliant record of success. This is still Kerr's university. Unfortunately, this is no longer Kerr's California—a subject to which I will return.

Second, there are nonetheless some continuities with the world Kerr knew in 1963. In his account, three large forces were driving research universities during the 1960s. They were universal access, progress through science, and improving the nation's economic productivity. These are still important goals for us today. As far as scientific progress and economic productivity are concerned, research universities like UC have done far more than simply contribute since 1963. They are now the driving force of the American R&D enterprise. We have had terrific success.

In talking about universal access today, we would make explicit what is implied in Kerr's use of that term: namely, the promise of racial, ethnic, and gender equality. The past few decades have been marked by both backward and forward movement on that front. The 1995 debate over banning affirmative action in UC admissions sparked a fight on the Board of Regents that spilled over into many areas of university life, from State budgets to shared governance. My Vice President, Jud King and I spent many months (in close partnership with the Academic Senate and the Council of Chancellors) forging new admissions policies for UC's post-affirmative action world. Let me just mention the most important principle underlying the admissions policies: the idea that students deserve to be judged not only on grades and test scores but also on the educational and life challenges they have faced, and by how well they have dealt with those challenges. The shorthand term for this approach is "opportunity to learn," and it means an admissions process that gives appropriate weight to grades and test scores but also to context and character. I believe this has served the University and our students well. Overall, our progress in diversity may not be as rapid as we would wish. But it has been far better than the prospects looked in the fall of 1995, after the controversial Regents' vote ending affirmative action. And we have done incredibly well in enrolling low-income students. That is something we can all be proud of.

Third, the quality of undergraduate education is better today than ever, despite large classes and increasing dependence on part-time lecturers. Since I stepped down as president, I have spent a lot of time with undergraduates and have been quite impressed. What we expect of our students these days is absolutely remarkable, and they have responded accordingly. In my opinion, UC undergraduates are among the best in the world. I do suspect, however, that it may be too easy for at least some of them to choose courses lacking rigorous intellectual content in the interest of avoiding subjects they consider too tough. (Good grades weigh heavily on the minds of young people, given the current tilt toward vocational education.) I wonder whether we might lure more students into taking demanding subjects if the courses themselves were made a little less demanding.

Fourth, an observation about the progress of online learning. When I became president in 1995, I was confident that online instruction was at the cusp of a great leap forward. I was mistaken. Not about the potential of online learning, but about the state of the art. We now have the basic technology and computing power for elegant interactive courses, but so far, at least, they have not been put together in quite the right fashion. What is critical is making them relevant and adaptable to the individual student. That was challenging enough back in the 1960s, when a Stanford colleague and I created computer-based courses in reading and mathematics for elementary school students. It is much more challenging to do at the college level. The courses I have seen are just not interactive or intellectually challenging enough. I have never had any doubt that online instruction would flourish one day, but I am surprised that day seems so slow in coming.

Fifth, I have some worries about the growing professional burdens on our faculty. Two examples, from different disciplines. The first is the decline in students majoring in the humanities. There is a growing literature, pro and con, on whether this is a full-blown crisis or a steep but temporary downturn. Is it a spillover effect from the 2008 recession? Is it an especially dramatic instance of the unpredictability of student choice? I don't know the answers to those questions. But the situation raises concerns about the future of the humanities and our capacity to continue producing the next generation of scholars and research in those fields. There can be no question that the humanities are fundamental to our idea of a truly liberal education.

In the case of science and engineering, research has advanced to the point that a faculty member who no longer has research funding is no longer in the game. These days competition for federal research grants is simply outrageous. Department chairs face having to put together million-dollar packages for incoming assistant professors. Once hired, professors are required to spend more and more time raising money to support their graduate students and their projects. We say that we need more people in STEM disciplines, but the academic job market can still be fiercely competitive for bright young PhDs.

Sixth, a few thoughts on UC governance. Kerr's essential task as president was ensuring that the University of the 1960s became an institution of distributed leadership—a federation, not an empire. He succeeded brilliantly. But not completely. Over time, the Regents and the president continued to delegate authority to the campus level. As president, I tried to do my part. I considered empowering chancellors and their campuses to be absolutely essential to the future of the University.

But I have another view about UC governance that will probably be less popular. When I was a chancellor, I fought for all the independence I could get. It is in the nature of chancellors to do that, recognizing that the modern University of California was built on the foundation of decentralized authority. Nevertheless, what we built was a system of research universities, and that is the charter within which we must work out our problems and our destiny. There are important policy issues that transcend any particular campus and are better addressed at the systemwide level. There are certain programs or activities that are systemwide in nature and better handled by the Office of the President, in coordination, of course, with the campuses. The California Digital Library is a case in point. We avoided a lot of problems and saved a lot of money by establishing it as a systemwide effort instead of leaving it to the campuses to create ten separate versions of the same idea. The UC Washington, DC Center is another example. I would argue that UC Press is in the same category. Sending programs of this sort to a campus is not a way of reducing their costs, despite what some may think.

Seventh, I am troubled by the constant criticism directed at higher education in general and UC in particular. Prospective donors often tell me that they will write a check to the University as soon as someone shows them the cost-benefit analyses that demonstrate we are not wasting money. Simply put, in constant dollars the cost of education per in-state UC student is less today than it has been in the last thirty years. I am especially bothered by charges that UC faculty waste too much time doing research. The evidence is overwhelming that university research is core to the American R&D enterprise. That's a fact—not speculation but a fact. The nation's future depends upon it. Too many people in Sacramento seem completely unaware.

This kind of criticism reminds us, as I said at the outset, that this is no longer Clark Kerr's California. Kerr and Governor Pat Brown were collaborators in the great enterprise of expanding the horizons of opportunity and the frontiers of knowledge through the state's higher education system. No one doubted that UC's mission was to be a research university. The 1960 Master Plan mandated it. Outstanding research demands much more than money for specific research projects. It means funding for scientific facilities, a student-faculty ratio that allows faculty time to conduct research, support for graduate students, and above all public support for the University's research mission. One important reason we have been largely successful in the past, during good times and bad, is because of partnerships between governors and UC presidents. A new governor is always a fresh opportunity to make the case for the University of California. We will have that opportunity in January, and I have high hopes.

Some of the things I've said tonight may leave you with the impression that I am pessimistic about UC's future. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am a believer in the research university's resilience and its genius for adaptation. And I am convinced of its lasting importance to creating the kind of world future generations will want to live in. So let me end these remarks where I began—with Clark Kerr and *The Uses of the University*: "[H]igher education in the United States is built on three-and-a-half centuries of triumph, not tragedy." I agree with Kerr. Future triumphs may be harder to come by. Yet I believe that a significant share of those triumphs will be achieved right here at the University of California. It is and will remain one of the most exciting institutions in the world.