



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

Inauguration of Peter Dorman

15th President of the University

Monday May 4, 2009 at 12:00 noon

Assembly Hall

President Peter F. Dorman

Presidential Inaugural Address

I must begin by saying that my primary feeling on this day is one of some amazement—that I should have the privilege of standing in this Assembly Hall to address an audience of distinguished guests from Lebanon, from around the region, and from across the globe. For this privilege I am deeply indebted to the Board of Trustees of AUB, and humbled by their invitation to lead an institution that has had such a deep and continuing impact in the Middle East for almost a century and a half.

I know I also speak for my wife, Kathy, in expressing our deep thanks for the generous welcome we have received from everyone at AUB: faculty, staff, students, alumni, trustees, and friends. You have invited us into your homes and hearts; you have offered us your friendship, and—in the best Lebanese tradition—you have entertained us prodigiously with the most gracious hospitality in the world.

I am especially grateful that so many members of my family are here to celebrate with us. In the audience today there are twelve descendants of AUB's founder, Daniel Bliss, down to the fifth and sixth generations. My great-grandmother, Mary Bliss Dale, helped to establish the School of Nursing in 1905. My grandfather, Harry Dorman, worked as a doctor at the University's hospital and served as the first dean of medicine. My father, Harry Dorman, Jr., was born at the AUB hospital and worked with the Presbyterian Mission in Beirut for several decades. Those of you

from Lebanon will not be surprised by the powerful attraction this country and this institution exert on families. In so many ways, we feel we have come home.

As we gather to observe another presidential transition and to celebrate the traditions of one of the greatest universities in the Middle East, I cannot help but note that in recent years these transitions have not always been celebrated as we do today. The last inaugural address was delivered by the late President Malcolm Kerr, twenty-five years ago, at a time when the University and its values were very much under threat. Those who have seen AUB through the crisis years of the Lebanese civil war, who resolutely kept the classrooms open, who devotedly served the hospital at risk of their lives, who unselfishly gave of their wealth to ensure that this institution would not die, must feel enormous pride in the University today. We owe you a great debt of thanks for preserving the values and ideals that were established 142 years ago.

I also count myself fortunate to be the successor of President John Waterbury, under whose leadership the newly rebuilt College Hall was dedicated and formal accreditation successfully pursued, and who achieved major goals of administrative restructuring and set AUB on a path of financial strength and strategic purpose.

As we acknowledge the past—both distant and recent—we resolutely look ahead to the future, pursuing what we believe to be AUB's destiny and its mission—to be a beacon of higher education that lights the way for the leaders of Lebanon and the region.

As AUB completes its latest round of accreditation and defines a new strategic plan, it is a timely moment to lay out three of our most critical priorities. These are founded on the most important resource of any institution—the men and women who support everything that we do, and everything that AUB stands for.

Our first priority must be a faculty who are empowered by their own research and seek after the creation of new knowledge. We must pledge ourselves to fostering the kind of intellectual community that thrives on collegial discourse and interdisciplinary innovation. For this, it is vital that our faculty be afforded research opportunities, either intramurally or through partnerships with other institutions, to undertake collaborative projects that focus on areas AUB is perfectly situated to advance. These include the development of renewable energy resources, strategies for a sustainable environment in arid climates, peace mediation and dialogue, and centers of excellence in treating human disease. To advance such goals, AUB will continue to expand its capital program and its technological capabilities to make sure we remain in the vanguard of developments in the world and the region.

Yet the demands of research are onerous in both time and effort. These must be reasonably balanced against the fundamental business of the university: communicating to our students—who represent the generations to come—the substance and excitement of their professional fields.

Our second priority is a dynamic and diverse student body. We must do more to ensure an AUB education for all academically qualified students in an atmosphere of broad social, economic, and intellectual diversity. Despite the increased availability of scholarship aid—both need-based and merit-based—AUB still welcomes a student cohort of whom four-fifths come from Lebanese

schools. Greater representation of international students on campus is essential to our efforts to provide all AUB students with the opportunity to experience the wealth of perspectives that such diversity brings. In particular, I believe young Americans have much to learn by spending time on this campus, in the company of students from Lebanon and its neighboring countries, students whom I have come to admire for their fierce debate of the important social and humanitarian issues of the day.

Our third priority is the cultivation of a responsive campus community. We must look for ways to enhance the dialogues among administration, faculty, and students, and to emphasize accountability in all we say and do. All of us have a shared stake in the success of this university. Our mutual engagement at AUB is the first step to promoting interaction with the society in which we live, whether it is through the humanitarian face of our great hospital or through our community projects. AUB has always recognized the abiding power of education to mobilize an invested citizenry—not only through teaching, but by personal example, and through emulation. One great strength of this University is that it has never existed apart from the society in which it was founded: it draws its vigor from the vibrant city of Beirut and from the diverse peoples of Lebanon.

But these three priorities cannot be pursued without heed to the careful balance that must be struck between the imperative to develop professional mastery on the one hand and great leadership skills on the other. This is the perennial quandary of any great university.

In economically uncertain times such as those we are now experiencing, a great premium is placed on the marketability of skills and the development of those skills at university. That is why students come to AUB, and why parents send them: to become engineers, doctors, men and women of finance, to pursue the professions of their choice.

In stark opposition to a narrow focus on career skills, the liberal arts require wide exposure to a variety of languages and cultures, the cultivation of abstract thinking, the mastery of written expression, broad competence in the methodologies of arts and sciences, and participation in civic activities. This more generalized education is intended to provoke curiosity across disciplines and to instill a lifelong thirst for the process of learning.

This question has been hotly debated in academia: if there is no practical utility in a liberal arts education, then why should we embrace its values? The simplest answer is that life is abundant.

We cannot embrace the fullness of life with learning that is applied narrowly or offered only for a brief span of college years. In essence, the liberal arts inform us that how we choose to earn a living is not the same thing as how we choose to live life.

However, in these days let us acknowledge several challenges that will have an impact on our immediate aspirations for AUB.

The first is the expanding economic crisis, which is now described as the most severe financial downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. It is hard to characterize the global effects fully, since we have not yet seen its depths. AUB cannot entirely avoid the consequences of falling financial markets that adversely affect our endowment. We will have to react prudently, and do so in a way that is consistent with our strategic planning. In acknowledging the loss of job opportunities and the diminished ability of students' families to shoulder the burden of paying for an AUB education, we must target financial aid as a high priority. AUB must continue to seek out the best students and provide adequate funding for them.

Second: In recent years we have witnessed a great proliferation of universities and graduate programs throughout the Middle East and the Gulf region, often established with prestigious American universities as partners. While some might rightly view them as competitors, I would argue that it is largely due to the historic success of AUB that the American model of education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels is in such enormous demand. Despite the fact that in recent years, this region of the world has notably suffered from American military intervention on the one hand and diplomatic disengagement on the other, the American model of education is still acclaimed—and I believe nowhere as ardently as at AUB—as the way to a bright future.

And, finally, although it has survived a debilitating civil war, Lebanon still suffers from the entanglements of the unresolved Palestinian question south of its border, as well as continuing internal tensions, as recent events remind us. The lingering effects of this volatility foster a perception that Beirut remains an unsafe city and continue to blunt our attempts to recruit numbers of students and faculty from overseas. You will all have seen that the *New York Times* named Beirut as the world's number one travel destination for 2009, a ranking that astonished everyone—except those of us who live here. We have reason to hope that the recent rapprochement of President Obama's administration may herald a new period of understanding and dialogue between the United States and the great nations of the Middle East.

I wish now to address a most important community within our campus: the students of AUB. You have come here for many reasons: to acquire a greater breadth of knowledge, to master the higher skills needed to earn a living, to join a more diverse community of peers, to study with a prominent professor, because your friends were coming here—or it may be that your parents simply said that you had to come.

Even before you complete your degrees, whether or not you are aware of it, you have joined an illustrious group of men and women, some of whom are seated in this hall, whose history stretches back to 1866. You are following in the footsteps of ambassadors, prime ministers, cabinet members, scientists, doctors, nurses, poets, and educators.

Like them, you will leave this campus a different person than when you arrived, because AUB offers you much more than the education you came to acquire. It offers you, in addition, a variety of educations, a variety of paths.

At AUB we encourage students to ask themselves: how am I bounded? How am I free? What values do I choose to embrace? For what causes do I devote my energies? These are questions

we cannot answer for you—we can only place them before you, along with the invitation to formulate your own response. This is, in essence, the subversive nature of the liberal arts experience: it affords you the gifts of critical thinking and positive skepticism.

Although it's possible—superficially—to view AUB as a collection of buildings and people and classes and research labs, it is in essence a series of dialogues, relationships, and interactions. I hope you will feel challenged during your time at AUB. I hope that, from time to time, you will even feel uncomfortable by the choices placed before you by your professors and friends as you strive to understand the common threads that connect us as human beings.

Although I have focused on the relationships and interactions that take place at AUB, let us also acknowledge the contribution of every member of society. Let us celebrate the dignity and worth of every human spirit and every human mind.

The commonality of humankind is hardly a new ideal. It is recognized even in an instructional text from ancient Egypt, the “Maxims of Ptahhotep,” written some 4000 years ago. The words are placed in the mouth of a vizier of the Old Kingdom, who offers as a guide to proper behavior, the following advice:

Don't be arrogant because of your knowledge, but confer with the unlearned man as well as with the learned, for no one has ever attained the perfection of skill; there is no artisan who has fully acquired the mastery of his craft. Good speech is rarer than malachite, yet it may be found even among the women at the grindstones.

As a final word, let me note that last summer Kathy and I arrived in Beirut from the University of Chicago, whose shield depicts a phoenix in full flight rising from the flames. The shield is a reference to the founding of that university following the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, which destroyed much of the city just one year after AUB graduated its first class of five men. Similarly, at this moment, we have a chance to acknowledge the re-emergence of this great institution from the effects of civil strife. AUB thrives today in much different form than our missionary founders would have envisioned, but nonetheless—after all this time—it remains dedicated to the same ideal of producing enlightened and visionary leaders.

But the task ahead is one we cannot succeed in alone: it will require the hard work, the careful planning, the mutual respect, and the willing partnership of all the communities that make up the AUB family—students, faculty, alumni, staff, and friends—as we endeavor to succeed in challenging times.

I thank you for your trust, and for your presence here today. Let us put our minds and hands together to this common task. As at the time the University's first foundations were laid down, the goal is to seek ever onward for an abundant future and an abundant life.