

Opening Ceremony 2019-20

President Fadlo R. Khuri

September 2, 2019

It can happen here

Every year around this time, in the dying days of summer, hope springs eternal on our beautiful and historic campus. Our remarkable students fill the campus with their vigor and ideas. They challenge dogma, and challenge the administration. Having observed the apathy and docility that pervades other leading universities, I wouldn't have it any other way. Even in these challenging times, the idealism of our students, accomplishments of our faculty, dedication of our staff, loyalty of our alumni, and wisdom of our Board make every September alive with possibilities. Where else but at AUB does hope bound forward with such authority, confidence, and insight?

There is no question we need such hope in these times—hope based on hard realities and realistic plans and not just dreams and optimism.

In “It can't happen here”, a novel by Sinclair Lewis¹ written in the interwar period and based on his wife's reporting from Europe on the rise of fascism, Lewis imagines an America under the aegis of its own dictator. Stranger things can happen. One need only look back at some alarming episodes from this summer. From the forced cancellation of the concert in Byblos by AUB's own Mashrou Leila² with fierce criticism by religious authorities of songs the band had played in Lebanon and the region for years, to the President of the United States urging its closest ally to ban the entrance of America's only two Muslim congresswoman³, to the Hong Kong riots intended to hold on to the populace's long earned rights to freedom of speech and a fair trial⁴, strange things have been happening, few of them reassuring. In fact, one could describe this summer as one where Elvis Costello could rightfully cry: “What's so funny about peace love and understanding?”⁵

But we are not here to rail against the lack of fairness, justice, and opportunity in the world. Rather, we exist to give hope to the hopeless, opportunity to the unfortunate, learning to the deserving, irrespective of their abilities to pay for that world-class education. We do this by recruiting the best and brightest, by sheltering and supporting them through the storms to come, by providing counsel and conscience to the leaders of the region. We are here to stay, to provide hope and opportunity for a better and brighter future.

So instead of asking what couldn't happen here, perhaps it would enjoin us to ask what CAN happen here to change a country, and a region so the best and brightest young people do

not have to leave their homes to gain a fair opportunity to succeed, to assume their natural human rights to health, happiness and to a better life. Rather we must ask how to create an environment where the planet, which we are currently consuming at breakneck pace, can rather be cherished and preserved for generations and indeed for millennia to come.

Looking at the course of history, what we see is that much of the most significant progress is achieved in periods of stress, suffering, and pain. The American New Deal was a result of the Great Depression and the travails of the Dust Bowl so eloquently captured in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*⁶. As Orson Welles's character Harry Lime memorably said in *The Third Man*: "You know what the fellow said: Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace – and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock."⁷

Also take what many consider the apogee of modern Western civilization—the 19th century. Europe flourished like never before in statecraft, science, and the arts with monumental figures like Beethoven, Napoleon, Bismarck, Faraday, Mendel, Goethe, Curie, Dickens, Marx, Pasteur and Darwin. America contributed its greatest President in Lincoln, its greatest inventor in Edison, its arguably most transformative innovation in Alexander Graham Bell's telephone. And it launched what would become its greatest university abroad, the Syrian Protestant College, forerunner to the American University of Beirut in 1866. The great Arab Renaissance, or Nahda, took place and gathered momentum throughout the 19th century, with many of its most impactful contributors having their roots here, including the great Mu'alleem Boutros Al Boustani, whose 200th birthday we celebrate this year. The 20th century beckoned, and while not what mankind could have hoped for, despite its scientific and technological leaps, including space exploration, modern medicine, and the internet, but also sadly, the two World Wars and Cold War. Almost a hundred million people died during, or as a consequence of, the two Great Wars, and tens of millions died at the hand of their own leaders, whether in the China of Mao's Cultural Revolution, or during Hitler and Stalin's dark reigns. America lost its way in Palestine and Vietnam—and the people of those lands lost so much more. Britain and France lost their empires, and free, hungry, chaotic new nations regained ownership of their civilizations and the responsibility for the lives of their citizens. Then when the Soviet Union and the Iron Curtain came crashing down, historians led by Francis Fukuyama declared the End of History⁸. But it didn't quite turn out that way.

If the 20th century was what a European friend of mine considers a course correction after the glory and pinnacles of the 19th century, what are we to say of the 21st century so far?

Growing financial and economic disparities. Exclusive, right wing ethnic nationalism is trumpeted from many of the greatest nations in the world, and many of its smallest and most complex. From the leaders of Russia, China and the US to Britain, Italy and Hungary, the rejection of multiculturalism and the demonization of the Other is a greater hit today than Bob Dylan’s emblematic, anti-racist “Blowin’ in the Wind”⁹ ever was at its peak in the 1960’s. How did we get here, and how did the plot of Lewis’s “It can’t happen here” become so apropos, so possible, even probable, in so many of the world’s most advanced civilizations? And how do we work to make the 21st century more like the highest peaks of the 19th rather than the most desolate valleys of the 20th?

So rather than worry about what could happen here, let us focus on accomplishing exactly what must occur to get us back on track. We can and must model this right here at the West’s greatest 19th century contribution to the Arab World, AUB itself. And perhaps we can do that by harnessing a most unexpected quality, human anger, towards the loftiest goals. Earlier this year, I read an article in *the Atlantic*, a wonderful magazine I first picked up in my brother Ramzi’s Yale dorm room in 1982. In this article entitled “Why are we so angry?” Charles Duhigg points out early studies of anger carried out in a small town in my native Massachusetts in 1977, indicating that to everyone’s surprise episodic anger was shown to be quite therapeutic and effective in forcing discussions that led to the resolution of lingering disputes¹⁰. As Duhigg points out: “Anger is one of the densest forms of communication. It conveys more information, more quickly, than almost any other type of emotion.” He goes on to point out that other forms of anger, where lingering resentment can easily turn to violence, where revenge becomes the driving factor, are far more destructive. These are precisely the forms of anger that have been leveraged so successfully over the course of much of the 20th century, and well into the 21st, the kind of anger that has manifested itself in serial school shootings, in the plague of gun violence that we see in America¹¹, in Britain’s need to purge itself of Poles and other Eastern Europeans through Brexit. As the author concludes, showing data that our current predicament, in America and across the globe suggest, “We may be further down a path toward widespread violence than we realize.”

In his landmark reconsideration of Napoleon, the British historian Andrew Roberts states: “The ideas that underpin our modern world—meritocracy, equality before the law, property rights, religious toleration, modern secular education, sound finances, and so on—were championed, consolidated, codified and geographically extended by Napoleon. To them he added a rational and efficient local administration, an end to rural banditry, the encouragement of science and the arts, the abolition of feudalism and the greatest codification of laws since the fall of the Roman Empire.¹²”

So how do we harness that same anger that properly directed, can resolve lingering issues? How do we fuel the same sense of hurt and exclusion that drove the Napoleonic Code, rather than that which forged the Napoleonic wars?

Let us consider those aspirational qualities that Roberts mentions—meritocracy, equality before the law, property rights, religious toleration, modern secular education, sound finances. How can we ensure that the 21st century moves more adroitly towards these goals, and that of conservation of nature, sustainability, inclusiveness, innovation, and equitable distribution of wealth, health and happiness? And let us consider what we at AUB are doing and can do to promote those same qualities in order to model a fairer and more just society, a more inclusive world. We already have faculty making fundamental discoveries that can impact the region. AUB's Medical Center cares for some of the most ill and unfortunate souls in the region. Our nonacademic staff are models of selfless dedication, showing unparalleled loyalty, purpose, and steadfastness to the university's mission, in spite of the economic maelstrom that threatens to engulf Lebanon and the Arab world. And our magnificent students, truly the best and brightest of the region and the world, are lighting up villages, educating the underprivileged, entertaining the country and the region with their music and theatre, and creating new value through innovation and application.

To be clear, we are committed, as we have always been to the education of our students, in good times and in bad. As Lebanon and the region move into a period of increased instability, we are committed to helping all of our students complete a world-class, fully supported education to the best of our abilities. I just spent three weeks crisscrossing the US to the point that I felt a kinship with the great Woody Guthrie, the bard of the people, whose best known composition, "This land is your land"¹³, was inspired by the great migration west of folks from Oklahoma to California during the Dust Bowl. This odyssey of the disenfranchised also inspired one of the greatest American novels of the 20th century, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Written by the 1962 Nobel Laureate John Steinbeck, it details the poignant travails of the suffering migrant Joad family, once proud landowning farmers in Oklahoma. This experience is being recapitulated to a tragic degree today through the displacement of large swaths of Syria's agrarian society to Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey. Like the "Okies" of Steinbeck's masterpiece, Syrian families suffer from hunger, poor access to health care, lack of educational opportunities, crowding, and poor sanitary conditions. Like the "Okies", however, they do encounter some who understand and support their plight, and our students and faculty are at the forefront, leading those efforts across the country. Our AUB community has built sheltered schools through the Ghata project, surveyed working conditions for migrant children, and built portable electronic

medical records, among many other projects. The nobility of individuals who are willing to sacrifice for others, so eloquently brought to the fore in Steinbeck's masterpiece, reminds me precisely of our remarkable students, faculty, and staff, who give of themselves unselfishly so that others "may have life, and have it more abundantly." These remarkable members of the AUB community are able to mobilize their anger not for revenge, but for clarity of purpose and for the greater good. They mobilize that anger through increasing expectations of themselves and others.

Woody Guthrie of course would inspire a whole generation of troubadours, the greatest of whom was the American singer/songwriter and 2016 Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan. Dylan wrote his legendary *Song to Woody*¹⁴ as a tribute to his idol, something I have reflected upon a great deal as I have flown more than one million miles over the last four years in service of an equally noble cause, our AUB! Dylan sings:

I'm out here a thousand miles from my home
 Walkin' a road other men have gone down
 I'm seein' your world of people and things
 Your paupers and peasants and princes and kings
 Hey, hey Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song
 'Bout a funny ol' world that's a-comin' along
 Seems sick and it's hungry, it's tired and it's torn
 It looks like it's a-dyin' and it's hardly been born
 Hey, Woody Guthrie, but I know that you know
 All the things that I'm a-sayin' and a-many times more
 I'm a-singin' you the song, but I can't sing enough
 'Cause there's not many men that done the things that you've done
 Here's to Cisco and Sonny and Leadbelly too
 And to all the good people that traveled with you
 Here's to the hearts and the hands of the men
 That come with the dust and are gone with the wind
 I'm a-leavin' tomorrow, but I could leave today
 Somewhere down the road someday
 The very last thing that I'd want to do
 Is to say I've been hittin' some hard travelin' too

Thank you! That brings me to the here and now and what we can do at AUB. We must continue to support our faculty and staff, our permanent army, as our Board Chair Philip Khoury describes them, by ensuring that they are not subjected to severe challenges to their

quality of life should the region and the country's economic, social, and political instabilities continue to build. And to further ease their minds, we pledge to do all we can to mitigate the effects of any serious devaluation in currency or further economic deterioration to prevent our students from graduating on time, our patients from being cared for, and our faculty and staff from being able to provide for their families. We will continue to hold ourselves and our university to the very highest standards of excellence, transparency and accountability. We will act to further stabilize our best and brightest faculty members by gathering and synthesizing all data from our last two rounds of tenure and promotion applications to ensure a process that is as fair, inclusive, and selective for excellence as possible. I am pledging today that these efforts will lead to faculty members having an opportunity to reapply sooner rather than later, in improved circumstances given the increased traction, precision and momentum the process has gained after two rounds.

As for our students, we have steadily increased both our need and merit based financial assistance such that it covers 60% of our student body, with new merit- and need-based programs that are being rolled out this year. At the same time, we are fully aware of their concerns with regard to the necessary benchmarking to dollar tuitions that were necessitated by our long and successful efforts to join the Common Application. As we aspire to have 30% of our matriculating students by 2030 being international, and while we embrace with great enthusiasm the magnificent students we have been privileged to educate from Africa, Asia, the MENA region and all ends of the world, we shall not turn our backs on the brilliant Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, Jordanian, and Iraqi students that have formed the bedrock of our student body for many generations, something we have already shown with support of our MEPI-TL Palestinian students.

We pledge to examine every day for lessons learned, for deeds accomplished and for areas of improvement. And we will do so in a manner befitting this great, progressive university, one which admitted women leaders a half century before the Ivy League Schools diversified their gender base¹⁵. To do so, we come back to the paradoxes of the last three centuries. The 19th, which witnessed an explosion of discovery, art, science and statecraft, carried within it the inescapable stain of empire, of some races and peoples seeing fit to rule over others. If the 20th century was the one in which empires crumbled, it provided its most inspiring leaders from outside the European sphere, men like Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. The 20th century too suffered consequences, as the scientific explosion led to much longer lifespans and far more medical and engineering advances, at the same time as we witnessed far greater loss of life, through conventional wars, epidemics of communicable and non-communicable diseases, and other means of mass destruction. Both centuries of course had their enduring legacies, their bright shining

moments. What then of the 21st century, of an age of information first heralded by Alexander Graham Bell's telephone, now a near universal means of communication, a source of stupefying information and overwhelming alienation through today's smartphones? What will their enduring impact be—of transparency and sharing, or of anger and alienation?

Perhaps the final words on that should be left to one of the most eloquent of the great men of the 20th century. In an increasingly multicultural world, whose linkages will only be strengthened over time by technology, and by our shared values and culture, shared values exemplified at this great and enduring university, the words of Martin Luther King ring more true today than ever before. As this great political strategist and champion of universal human rights once said: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but the content of their character."¹⁶

So I say, yes, it can happen here. We can lead by example, provide for our community, and continue to model a fair, just and inclusive society. Harkening back to where we started this conversation, to Mashrou Leila, and to all of our diverse children, that in the final analysis is our dream, that all of our own academic and biologic children and the peoples of this great region whose learning we are privileged to lead, will one day be judged on the content of their character. And to make that dream into a reality, "we have promises to keep, and miles to go before we sleep, and miles to go before we sleep."¹⁷

¹ It Can't Happen Here, by Sinclair Lewis (Doubleday, 1935)

² [Mashrou' Leila's festival performance canceled after threats \(CNN, August 4, 2019\)](#)

³ [Israel denies entry to Omar and Tlaib hours after Trump's push for ban](#) (Washington Post, August 7, 2019)

⁴ [Hong Kong: Timeline of extradition protests](#) (BBC News, 2019)

⁵ "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding", written by Nick Lowe (1974)

⁶ The Grapes of Wrath, by John Steinbeck (Viking Press, 1939)

⁷ The Third Man, directed by Carol Reed (1949)

⁸ The End of History, by Francis Fukayama (Free Press, 1992)

⁹ Blowing in the Wind by Bob Dylan (1962)

¹⁰ [Why Is America So Angry? By Charles Duhigg](#), The Atlantic (January 2019)

¹¹ [Mass Shootings in 2019, Gun Violence Archive](#)

¹² Napoleon The Great, by Andrew Roberts (Penguin, 2015)

¹³ This Land is Your Land, by Woody Guthrie (1940)

¹⁴ [Song to Woody, by Bob Dylan \(1962\)](#)

¹⁵ [First woman graduates with regular degree - 1925](#) AUB Timeline

¹⁶ [I have a Dream](#), Speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jnr. August 28, 1963

¹⁷ [Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#), Poem by Robert Frost (1922)