

## The Invincible Summer

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Opening Day Remarks  
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Trustees, Faculty, Staff, Students, Parents, Alumni, and friends of AUB everywhere,

Welcome to the 156<sup>th</sup> Opening Day of the American University of Beirut. While no two years are alike, this is an Opening Day unlike any other. Already, this summer alone has seemed endless, somehow both eternal and infernal, while we impatiently await the Fall semester praying for relief from the summer heat, the pandemic, the political impasse. The planned-for return of students and faculty to campus brings hope, and a sense of agency without minimizing the extraordinary, disheartening challenges which have buffeted AUB, Lebanon and the world. Yet one thing has become crystal clear over the last 24 months to many of us: the American University of Beirut must fundamentally transform if it is to continue to persist and thrive. And persist and thrive we must. The stakes are simply too high, and this university is too important for us to fail.

The challenges we face are monumental. Lebanon, the country that AUB has exclusively resided in since 1866, faces an existential crisis. A recent trip from Mount Lebanon to Beirut showed me a far darker Lebanon than any we have seen in generations. The only lights we saw were cars and gas stations; we witnessed angry disputes brought about by despair over severe fuel shortages. As we drove past town after village to see home after home darkened, it dawned on me that Lebanon was in a far different place than it was during the Civil War. And no one, no Prince Charming of person or nation, is coming to the rescue. For the first time in centuries, Lebanon must save itself.

Adding to the worsening state of affairs in Lebanon and the region, the recent rapid Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, culminating in a catastrophic exit which has trapped thousands including 5 of our students, sounds a clamorous warning to all—especially those in the Global South—to fundamentally rethink how to resolve challenges of identity, inclusiveness and sustainability.

For the last three years, the crises, including national financial collapse and a once in a century global pandemic, have accelerated and worsened. Throughout, the Board of Trustees, university leadership and I have listened, absorbed, debated and deliberated how to forge a path forward for this most precious of universities, one whose existence provides diversity, hope, opportunity, purpose and indeed life to its community.

We firmly believe that path forward starts with careful, critical self-examination and a realistic appraisal of our mission, its relevance and resilience in an era and a culture of change, of ephemerality of values, of “what have you done for me lately.” How does one reaffirm purpose to an enduringly valuable university in a time of shifting alliances, malleable perceptions, and alternate facts? What lessons has history taught us pertaining to the preservation of that which is most precious in our society? And how do we apply these lessons to our essential university and the fragile nation it resides in?

During my university days, I took a class with the late Donald Kagan, an historian and classicist who passed away on August 6<sup>th</sup> at the age of 89.<sup>i</sup> An immigrant from Lithuania, Kagan would become extraordinarily influential in American intellectual and political life. Kagan was a magnificent teacher, profoundly generous and gracious with his time to his students, like our own Makhluף Haddadin, dean of Arab chemists, who will complete 58 years on the faculty at AUB this year. It is a source of great pride that many of our AUB professors teach, guide and support our students, above and beyond the call of duty, sincerely, compassionately and wisely. This generosity of spirit among our faculty and staff has been particularly evident the last two years. I am profoundly grateful for it and acknowledge it publicly here once more.

In the course of taking the Introduction to Ancient Greek History by Kagan, I managed to work my way down from an A- to a B+ as a direct result of my final essay where I posited that democracy was vulnerable to great demagogues, representing its greatest internal threat. I drew on observations from my youth, recalling the figures who had dotted the Arab world, some romantic but all deeply flawed “leaders”, men who left their nations and peoples far worse off than when they arrived on the scene. I contrasted Demosthenes with Pericles to emphasize that in electing and empowering Demosthenes, a peerless orator whose moral malleability undermined his character, Athenian citizens bore responsibility for Alexander’s subsequent sack and destruction of Athens, after Demosthenes challenged Macedonia, the emerging military power in Northern Greece. Athens had previously been defeated in the Peloponnesian War against Sparta, only to spring back to life some thirty years later as Sparta declined.<sup>ii</sup> There was to be no “comeback” for Athenian Democracy after the Macedonian invasion. But thanks to Aristotle and other influences, Alexander’s conquests of the known world disseminated Athenian culture, ensuring it far outlived both Sparta and Macedonia in enduring influence as the subsequent Hellenization has endured for millennia.

Kagan was unconvinced. He viewed Demosthenes as an intellectual freedom fighter who had rallied Athens. Most importantly, Kagan disagreed that American democracy was particularly susceptible to demagogues from within. In “While America Sleeps”, written in the late 1990’s, Kagan envisioned many encroaching external threats to American hegemony and urged rearmament.<sup>iii</sup> It was overconfidence against external threats that he consistently warned against. Kagan regarded *Hubris* as a cardinal sin.

Such are our experiences that they refract and influence our judgment and perspective. Those two crucial qualities, judgment and perspective, intermarry with ethics, humility and determination to form the best citizens and leaders, protecting institutions and nations alike from *Hubris*. In these dire times, citizenship and to an extent leadership are both best borne by the many, the staple of democratic systems as taught by the academic bedrocks that keep them safe. Like the Ancient Athenians and the Founding Fathers of the United States, AUB's policies and procedures contain covenants for joint governance to engage different parties and keep the university safe. While many of these have stood the test of time, universities must evolve to provide their students sustainable value, just as nations must evolve to allow their people life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. <sup>iv</sup>

"The ancients have so much to teach and offer us so much to debate." Wise words from a wise man and a preeminent historian of our own region, Philip Khoury. One lesson of history is particularly germane today: the example of a very different ancient leader, Pericles of Athens. Pericles was a more patrician, less populist orator than Demosthenes would become a century later. Unlike Demosthenes, lauded for his oratory by contemporaries but far less influential over subsequent eras, Pericles' leadership and oratory have endured to influence thinkers and leaders, to provide hope for generations. Pericles' most famous speech is surely his Funeral Oration, in which he addresses an Athens demoralized by defeat and wracked with disease.<sup>v</sup> Recognizing the dour mood of the public, Pericles brings to life the historic accomplishments of Athens and its citizens, making a compelling case that its democracy and ethos represented a prize well worth fighting, and dying, for. In describing Athens, and the forefathers of the men he spoke to, Pericles exhorts the living to fight for their city state despite prospects of near certain defeat to the Spartans. It is a mark of the speech's effectiveness that Athens rallied and fought on until well after Pericles' own demise some years later.

While Pericles did not provide a distinct path forward in his Oration, his example inspired the men of Athens to fight. We must also resist and persist, albeit using peaceful methods, if with no less determination than the ancient Athenians. AUB and Lebanon are well worth rallying, fighting and staying for. I have borne many withering critiques and much unsought advice from online speculators and politicians alike on leadership, some well-intentioned but most well wide of the mark. I have received more well-considered advice, support, guidance, criticism and contemplation from trustees, alumni, faculty, students and staff, from colleagues in the field and of course from my own family. To inspire us, rather than soaring oratory, we have the constant example of our AUBMC physicians, nurses and staff who have fought and continue to fight for our patients, values and community, leading in the battle against the pandemic and the near collapse of Lebanon's health system against both overwhelming odds and the all too human temptation to leave for greener climes. We must, and will do no less.

AUB's purpose is to empower generations, to serve and care for those less fortunate, to heal the ill, to bind the wounds of individual and society alike, all while we pursue excellence for the greater good of

mankind, and for the peoples of the region we have served with distinction and fidelity for over a century and a half. To avoid mission drift and abjure straying from our purpose, we will first secure our base, our home campus. At AUB, we provide hope, purpose and continuity. This summer, we launched our inclusive 3-year, \$150 million Road to the Highway strategy, our Board Designated Professorships and Medical, Staff and Faculty Heroes Programs. We insist on supporting every member of our AUB community, to the greatest extent of our ability, while remaining sustainable as an institution. This will allow many to stay and continue to advance in their careers at AUB while sparing them the unenviable choice between serving our shared mission and providing for and protecting their nuclear families. It is also vital that we ensure our world class AUBMC has adequate medications, fuel, and supplies for our physicians, nurses, and staff to perform their vital, lifesaving work.

Our students, faculty and staff expect a great deal from this university, and we must strive to always live up to that, including doing everything possible to return our students stranded in Afghanistan, to serve our diverse learning community during the pandemic and Lebanese crisis in order that they continue their journey of discovery, all while maintaining and continuously improving our educational standards. We will reinvigorate the experience of our students through an enriched curriculum where experiential learning interdigitates with the liberal arts and scientific education that AUB is rightfully renowned for. We do so such that, armed with an AUB education, our students will be prepared and predisposed to serve the beleaguered societies of the world, societies challenged by war, unemployment, an absence of social freedoms, lack of participation in the governance of their nations and, most damning of all, a loss of hope for a better tomorrow. These societies and the people who comprise them can be transformed by individuals who are privileged to attend our great university, such that they too “may have life and have it more abundantly.”

AUB has contributed manifestly to the origins of Lebanon and Beirut’s modern identity, its blending of provincial and cosmopolitan natures. The world did not embrace Lebanon primarily because of its beautiful Mediterranean coast, charming, educated peoples, and open, welcoming nature. Rather, it was the Syrian Protestant College that brought American and Occidental learning, intermixing it with Arab culture for the peoples of what is today Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and occupied Palestine. From 1920 onward, it was the American University of Beirut that brought the world to Lebanon and the countries of the Levant, and that spread the people and cultures of the region to the entire Arab World and beyond. In doing so, AUB broadened the social contract whereby women and men of diverse backgrounds, religions, genders, and sexualities started to accept others who were different from them. Almost one quarter of our students hold non-Lebanese passports, making AUB the second most diverse university by percentage and by far the most diverse university by nationality across the MENA region. A defining feature of our ethos is that we are deeply acculturated in our home. We are the American University OF Beirut, not simply the American University IN Beirut. We serve the peoples of

Lebanon and the region. And no set of circumstances, no threat or harm will force us to abandon our sacred charge.

With uncertainty surrounding the socio-economic and political decline that Lebanon is experiencing, it is our manifest duty to enhance the connectivity between Lebanon, its immediate region and the world. To further diversify, over the course of the next 12 to 24 months, we hope to launch new AUB campuses, one to the West and one to the East of our eternal home in Beirut. These campuses will allow the interchange of ideas, knowledge and purpose with our campus in Beirut, and spread the unique culture of our magnificent university, enhancing both AUB's diversity and its excellence simultaneously. By extending beyond Lebanon to reach the many who deserve the unique brand of AUB's education, we fulfill our mission, bringing the ethos of this university to the peoples of the region and the world. By introducing that which is most meaningful and enduring in the unique culture of this great research intensive, liberal arts university, itself deeply rooted and acculturated in Beirut, more broadly to the wider world, we preserve much of what is most worthwhile about Lebanon, extending its influence and identity beyond its shores.

As the 2016 Nobel Laureate in Literature and Bard of the North Bob Dylan sang in *That's Alright Ma (I'm only bleeding)*: "He not busy being born is busy dying."<sup>vi</sup> Pericles, Donald Kagan, and others have recognized this tipping point for men and for nations. Only dinosaurs, figurative and literal, stand still, and all know their fate. As we immerse ourselves in transforming this great university, we do so in the understanding that the alternative is chilling, exemplified by Franz Kafka's dark tale of counter-evolution, *Metamorphosis*.<sup>vii</sup> Should we at AUB oversleep the clarion call to academic evolution, we will be condemned with the cockroaches of history. It is to ward against the counter evolution in liberal thought, invoked by those who wish to impose their own values on others rather than persuade them to engage in a shared destiny, that AUB exists. And why it will long endure.

The ongoing pandemic has shown our institutional resilience and adaptability, as well as the collaborative nature of our community. At the same time, the lessons of the pandemic must be fully absorbed and incorporated into the University of the future. Universities must evolve, and indeed transform, to serve a global community of learners. These encompass individuals early in their second decade all the way to those well into their ninth. At AUB, we are doggedly building our armamentarium of online, non-degree, adult education, executive education, and cultural offerings with the goal being to reach 25,000 distinct learners by 2025. A shining example of quality offerings AUB must sustain and expand is our University for Seniors, established and led by our Interim Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences Abla Sibai, recipient of the 2020 L'Oreal-UNESCO For Women in Science International Award.

During our transformation, we count on the support of our friends across the globe, including alumni, governments and foundations. We must continue onward and ever upward. The dangerous games

played by political actors in Lebanon and abroad must not be allowed to impair the continuity of AUB's teaching and healing missions. The severe economic collapse, which the World Bank has named as one of the three worst in the last 150 years of human history, has impoverished the Lebanese such that more than 74% of them are below the Poverty Line and can no longer afford to pay full tuition for their children.<sup>viii</sup> ix We must all shoulder additional responsibilities, such that those outstanding students who are capable and suited to attend AUB but whose parents or guardians live in Lebanon, can attend for an affordable price, while those whose parents live and work abroad render their tuition in a more stable currency.

"In the depths of Winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer," wrote Albert Camus.<sup>x</sup> Camus grappled with existential philosophical questions with an equipoise and generosity of spirit like few before or since. He openly struggled to grasp the meaning of life, how to weather its many difficulties. In novels, plays, and essays, the Nobel Laureate explored the depths, heights, and wonders of our existence. This quote was penned in a series of essays, published long after his death, in which Camus urged humanity to persevere through adversity, timely advice for our peoples today. This lies at the core of why we at AUB must more fully embrace and indeed exemplify our purpose. In the depths of each of our winters there lies an invincible summer. To pursue excellence for the greater good, saving lives whose values are immeasurable is never easy, all while empowering great minds, whose futures portend a better, fairer, more inclusive world. Now more than ever, as Camus also reflected, we must mend what we can, band together and pledge ourselves to causes far greater than ourselves. Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> In Memoriam: Donald Kagan, celebrated historian of the ancient world and revered teacher. Yale News, August 10, 2021. <https://news.yale.edu/2021/08/10/donald-kagan-celebrated-historian-ancient-world-and-revered-teacher>

<sup>ii</sup> Kagan, Donald. *A New History of the Peloponnesian War*. Cornell University Press, 1987. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1xx579>.

<sup>iii</sup> Kagan, Donald and Frederick W. Kagan, *While America Sleeps: Self-delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

<sup>iv</sup> United States Declaration of Independence, 1776.

<sup>v</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Rex Warner, Penguin Classics, 1963.

<sup>vi</sup> Dylan, Bob. *Bringing It All Back Home*, Columbia Records, 1965.

<sup>vii</sup> Kafka, Franz and Stanley Corngold. *The Metamorphosis*, Toronto: Bantam Books, 1981.

<sup>viii</sup> World Bank Lebanon Economic Monitor, "Lebanon Sinking (To the Top 3)", Spring 2021. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/394741622469174252/pdf/Lebanon-Economic-Monitor-Lebanon-Sinking-to-the-Top-3.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> ESCWA. *Multidimensional poverty in Lebanon (2019-2021): Painful reality and uncertain prospects*. September, 2021. E/ESCWA/CL3.SEP/2021/POLICY BRIEF.2.

<sup>x</sup> Camus, Albert. "Return to Tipasa", *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, New York: Knopf, 1968.