

Steve, thank you very much for that introduction,
and to all of you here

Howdy!

My wife Jill and I are not former students.

Before 2007, we never thought we would be here in Aggieland, or a part of this community, and certainly, I never imagined having the high honor of delivering this address at the 2nd largest muster gathering on the planet.

On behalf of our entire family, daughters Jacqueline '11, Madeline '15, son-in-law Eric '17 and our future Aggie grandchildren Isabelle and Ellie, thank you for this tremendous honor. I am truly humbled and appreciative beyond words.

I also want to thank everyone in this community for the tremendous support you gave Jill and me during our time in Washington DC leading the national response to COVID-19.

For our nation, it was a time like no other – at least since the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic that took 50 million lives around the world, including many Aggies, especially those serving in the military during World War I.

If you look at the place cards on the oak trees around Simpson drill field, at least one third of those lost were likely victims of the flu, not enemy weapons

COVID-19 challenged our science, our health care system, our domestic manufacturing and industrial base, and our global leadership.

For these challenges, America **and more importantly Americans** rose to the occasion.

Without American know-how, determination, grit, and leadership, the world **might** have developed a safe and effective vaccine by December 2024, not December 2020; thousands in hospitals might have gone without a life-saving ventilator, but they didn't, and by December 2020, we had already distributed 180 million rapid tests on a weekly basis, to every single nursing home, assisted living, hospice, tribal nation, and governor throughout America.

In my opinion, America overcame these scientific and logistical obstacles in an extraordinary fashion – but that was only a part of the story.

In a very real sense, COVID also amplified, and sometimes challenged - fundamental tenets of what we hold sacred as Americans, like

the role of the federal government and federal authority with respect to our local communities and families,

like the obligation of state and federal leaders to be completely transparent with the public they serve

and the primary importance of maintaining Americans' freedom of speech and scientific debate – especially when no one knew all the answers.

The pandemic also illustrated the unfortunate consequences when some in the press strove more for political outcomes than honest reporting in the public interest.

I discussed these challenges daily, with The White House Task Force and Vice President Pence, and frequently with President Trump in the Oval Office.

We were all committed to defeating the virus, but also not destroying our country in the process.

I confess that the pandemic taught and re-taught me many lessons, and one of them is the essential importance of Texas A&M University, its 550,000 students and former students, its millions of future students, and the commitments they all share – that you share - to our nation, to our values, and to service to others –

commitments that define being an Aggie.

Jill and I are not former students, but we do aspire to be Aggies –we try our best to champion the values and traditions that make this university not only unique, but **essential** for preserving what makes the United States exceptional, and what also makes Texas the most exceptional state within our exceptional nation.

As Lt Gov Bob Bullock so famously said, it ain't bragging if it's true. And American exceptionalism is most certainly true.

Joining us tonight is also my mother Freida. She is a retired police officer from Jefferson Parish Louisiana, and my late father was also a reserve police officer, so I often reflect upon the

concept of the “thin blue line” which we all have seen on stickers and flags especially in this community

The thin blue line symbolizes the police – it is solid, but also threadlike and fragile. That thin line protects our society -it separates peace, order and liberty, from crime, violence and chaos.

Let us all take a moment to recognize all of our law enforcement officers with us tonight!

After my time in Washington DC, I know that there is another thin line that I want to speak about. And that is **the thin maroon line.**

The thin maroon line consists of students and former students, joined by like- minded Americans who never attended A&M but who also cherish liberty and peace, who accept every person because of the content of their character, **who live** to serve, but who **are not afraid to die for** their family, their country, or their God.

The thin maroon line was perhaps defined on Corregidor in 1942, under constant attack by the Japanese, when Brigadier General George F. Moore, class of 1908 and Major Tom Dooley,

class of 1935, held a roll call—known as **muster** in army terms—calling the names of each of the Aggies in their command.

The thin maroon line was preserved and protected in Korea and Vietnam, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and today around the world.

But of course, the thin maroon line is defined by much more than our armed military defenses against enemies – and it is evidenced daily.

The thin maroon line is sustained and strengthened

Every time we commit to the Aggie core values of excellence, integrity, leadership, loyalty, respect, and selfless service.

Every time we demonstrate our uncommon appreciation for our State and our Nation.

Every time we look past the problems of the day and focus on the foundational principles that make our nation the free-est in the history of civilization;

Every time tens of thousands of students perform community service projects during the Big Event;

Every time we support the free expression of ideas on campus, even those we don't like, because that is what independent

thought and education is all about;

Every time we expand opportunities to attend Texas A&M for students whose potential is right there – waiting to be unlocked so they can be better sons and daughters, husbands and wives, entrepreneurs and patriots.

In the truest sense, we are here tonight to remember and celebrate those who have come before us, each of whom has been an essential part of that thin maroon line.

And we understand, to our deepest core, that the only way to keep that thin maroon **line unbroken and indelible**, is to respond **HERE** for those who can no longer say HERE for themselves.

Now more than ever, the thin maroon line needs to be bright and bold, audacious and unapologetic, and more influential than it has ever been....,

In the words of General Earl Rudder, hero of Point d'Hoc and legendary former president of Texas A&M, taken from his campus muster speech in 1956:

I have never known any Aggie to show any apathy or lethargy in any matter connected with Texas A&M College. We need that

same enthusiastic spirit in the halls of government – from the local school board all the way to the White House

Truer words for the year 2022 have never been spoken.

Reading that quote brought me back to an experience I had on March 13, 2020, in that White House about which General Rudder spoke;

I had just been named testing czar and survived my first huge press event in the Rose Garden of the White House with President Trump and the CEOs of major American Corporations like Walmart and CVS.

I had just been tasked with implementing a nation-wide system of drive through testing sites, and to do so in the next 7 days!

So, after the press conference, I started to assemble a core planning group in the West Wing of the White House, which is actually very small and cramped. I needed to find an empty office for a huddle with key leaders from across the government and the military.

One of the White House staffers said there was an open office on the ground floor right next to the Situation Room, and we could

use it because the occupant was on travel.

I opened the door, stepped into that office, and true to God, it looked like a cross between Kyle Field and the Dixie Chicken. There was a blazing neon Texas A&M sign at least 8 feet across, hung on the back wall, so bright I wanted to pull out my sunglasses;

there was a stuffed reveille on the chair, a howdy sign on the coffee table, maroon pillows on the sofa, and too many other Aggie items to recount.

Of course, by accident – I prefer to think of it as Divine providence – I had walked into Brook Rollins office, class of 94, and the first woman to serve as Texas AM student body president. Brooke at that time was serving as Assistant to the President and later as the Director of the Domestic Policy Council at the White House.

I cannot tell you how comfortable it made me feel to be around all that Aggie bling in a time of crisis. I felt right at home and knew in that moment, I had the full support of the Aggie nation.

I almost led a yell practice, but decided that the group I had assembled and needed to lead for the next 10 months would not really know how to react to BTHO COVID.

In this time of COVID, I can assure you that there is nothing more infectiousthan the Aggie Spirit, and my family caught a bad case of it when we first came to College Station for a visit in 2007. Thank you Mike McKinney!

The infectious Aggie Spirit: There is no treatment for it, no vaccine against it. In one fell swoop, if you are the tiniest bit susceptible, it goes through your blood and hits you right in the gut in a way you can't ignore.

And once you have it, there's no getting rid of it.

Many people have tried to define that infectious Aggie spirit, which is a very hard thing to do. I am fond of Red Cashion Class of 53's explanation from his 1990 campus muster speech. About the Aggie Spirit, he said:

You must live it- to understand it. You have to share it – to feel it. And most of all, you have to Give it – in order to receive it

I don't have a better definition for the Aggie Spirit, but I do have a recent example, I would like to share.

In mid-March, Jill and I attended an Aggie baseball game at Blue Bell Park. It was a weekday evening game, and it was cold – in the 30s. I had on 3 layers and Jill brought two blankets. But we were going to attend the game and support the team, no matter what

At the end of the first inning, a young woman walked down the aisle with her 12-year-old son, and an infant strapped tightly to her chest, so bundled up you could hardly tell there was a baby there.

They sat in the first row of our section, right in front of us.

The twelve-year old was pretty big and burly, had on an Aggie jacket, and Aggie cap, carried an Aggie baseball for signing, and was plowing through popcorn and one of those \$8 Blue Bell Park Dr Peppers as fast as he could.

As Aggies do, we struck up a conversation. The mom said that they just had just drove in from Midland –425 miles - to watch the game, because it was the only thing her son wanted to do for his spring break,

Coming to the game would be a moment that he would remember forever.

I asked if she was a former student, and she said no, but her husband was; but he had died of COVID while she was pregnant with her new baby boy strapped to her chest.

She said she was on campus to continue to live out her late husband's passion for this university, and to hopefully make possible her son's number one goal in life – to attend Texas A&M University and perhaps play catcher on the baseball team.

That young mom was not a former student, but to me she epitomized the Aggie Spirit – she was fully infected, and passing it on the best way she could.

The football team has the nation's top recruits, the academic buildings are second to none, and the Aggie Park will be impressive, but what assures me about the future of this University – and the infinite length of the thin maroon line - is that mom and her two sons.

And similarly infected with that Aggie Spirit, we are all here tonight.

Your presence demonstrates your commitment to Texas A&M and to your fellow Aggies, and to people like that young mom who like us, are internally conflicted. On one hand, we grieve for those we have lost;

on the other hand, we smile about the good times past, and know that the future is indeed bright for our sons and daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and the many tens of thousands more who are only related to us through the institution we love.

Earlier today, The Association of Former Students led a roll call in the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center to ensure that every Aggie is remembered at a Muster, as they must be.

Volunteers representing current and former students, faculty, staff

and administration called **every name** on our worldwide Muster Roll and answered “Here!” for each and every one.

That roll call began at sunrise included the names of over 1400 Aggies.

It lasted more than two and a half hours.

Among the names called were those of:

Byrom T. Wehner, Class of 1939, a World War II veteran who turned 103 last year and was the third-oldest living Texas Aggie.

Shirley Porter, Class of 1965, one the first women able to pursue a degree from Texas A&M.

And tragically, that list included more than a dozen current Texas A&M students whom we lost in the past year.

Tonight, we will do as Dr. John Ashton, Class of 1906, instructed us in the poem he wrote in 1943, called “*Roll Call for the Absent.*”

He wrote:

Softly call the muster,

Let comrade answer, “Here!” He also wrote, in the same poem,
Mark them “present” in our hearts, We’ll meet some other day.

We are all blessed to be Texas Aggies in countless ways, blessed to
share the unconquerable, incomparable, indescribable, and
infectious Aggie Spirit.

Blessed to preserve that thin maroon line,
and Blessed with the confidence to know that when we have passed
through this life, that someone somewhere, in an auditorium or
living room, restaurant or battle field, on the sea or in a cave, will
say HERE for us.