

**Keynote Address to the
Dr. John Montgomery Scholarship Banquet
LeFlore County NAACP
August 24, 2013
Andy Lester**

Thank you, President Hooks, for that kind introduction. First, let me say, how honored Barbara, my wife, and I are to be here this evening, to speak at a scholarship banquet sponsored by the LeFlore County Chapter of the NAACP, especially as it is dedicated to Dr. John Montgomery.

Through many generations, Dr. Montgomery, like the NAACP, has made a huge difference in people's lives. I know this because I've spoken with several individuals who have told me of what Dr. Montgomery meant to them. My one-time fellow regent, Dr. Claud Evans, who is here this evening, detailed the many ways Dr. Montgomery has influenced and mentored him, from the time he was

growing up and throughout his career as a fellow veterinarian. And my law partner, Scott Thompson, told me how Dr. Montgomery actually got him to change his plans and attend Oklahoma State University.

As you know, Dr. Montgomery was the first African-American member of the Board of Regents for the Oklahoma Agricultural & Mechanical Colleges. And it is an honor for me to be on the same Board on which Dr. Montgomery served many years earlier. Let me tell you a little bit about our Board.

The A&M Regents govern five institutions. Connors State College, in Warner and Muskogee, and Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College, in Miami and Grove, are both two-year schools. Oklahoma Panhandle State University, located in Goodwell – Goodwell is about as far from Poteau as one can be, and still be in Oklahoma – is a four-

year institution that serves the far western portion of our state. Oklahoma State University is our state's major research land grant institution, and has campuses in Stillwater, Oklahoma City, Okmulgee and Tulsa, including the College of Osteopathic Medicine. And Langston University – Dear Langston – with campuses in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, in addition to the main campus in Langston, is not only a land grant institution, but also the westernmost of America's historically black colleges and universities.

Our Board of Regents is a constitutional board, composed of nine members. Eight are appointed by the Governor to staggered eight-year terms, with the advice and consent of the Oklahoma State Senate. The Governor also appoints the President of the State Board of Agriculture, and that person serves *ex officio* on the Board, but his or her term is coterminous with that of the

Governor.

Now, you might think that with a setup like this – appointments are made by politicians – the board would consist primarily of political hacks and cronies. Certainly that would be possible. But in practice, that has not been the case. For example, when Governor Henry, a Democrat, had completed his eight years in office, and had appointed every member to the Board, half were Republicans. Thus far, Governor Fallin, a Republican has announced six appointments, three Republicans and three Democrats.

The members of our Board all work hard as regents. It does not have to be this way, and, in fact, it is not necessarily this way on other boards of regents. The ethos of our Board, however, is that each member puts in at least 15-20 hours per week on Board of Regents matters, and some put in even greater amounts of time.

This is all done on a volunteer basis. The members of the Board of Regents are all highly successful people from a variety of fields of endeavor, and all volunteer their time, and a lot of time at that, for the betterment of our various institutions.

Dr. Montgomery is a great example of this. When people who know him well speak of Dr. Montgomery, they universally describe him as a leader, a person of great respect and admiration, a man on the one hand of strong conviction who nevertheless has a calm, gentle demeanor.

Dr. Montgomery is a man of many amazing accomplishments. Did you know he was an All-American football player? You probably know he has served as Deacon of Mt. Calvary Baptist Church. But did you know he was appointed to various state boards and commissions under four Oklahoma governors – Bartlett, Bellmon, Boren

and Hall – two Republicans and two Democrats. And shortly after the United States Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Dr. Montgomery was instrumental in leading Poteau to be the first in Oklahoma to integrate its schools and to do so smoothly.

The LeFlore County NAACP rightly celebrates Dr. John Montgomery. From my perspective as a member of the A&M Board of Regents, and having met Dr. Montgomery and knowing something of Dr. Montgomery's background and interest in education, tonight's theme – Bridging the Gaps – is an appropriate one. For today, education remains the key to success. And a higher education – a college degree – is vital.

My own education has meant a lot to me. As you heard, I am a lawyer, and I could not be a lawyer without a higher education. Before attending law school, I was a

college history major.

Now as someone who is a lifelong student of history, it would be virtually impossible for me to pass up this opportunity to note that we are on the cusp of celebrating important anniversaries in our history. As a lawyer, and particularly one who has spent much of his practice in the area of civil rights law, these anniversaries, and what they represent, are particularly meaningful to me.

This year marks the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. With the stroke of a pen, President Abraham Lincoln began the process of making real the American promise of liberty to all.

And in just a couple of days, we will mark 50 years since one of the greatest speeches in American history. For on August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered a timely, rhetorical masterpiece that has come to be known

as his “I Have A Dream” speech.

Let me insert here how meaningful it is to me that my name, in an extremely small way, is associated with Dr. King. About a quarter century ago, I served as an inaugural member of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday Commission of Enid, Oklahoma, and during my tenure, I’m proud to say, we were able to lead the City of Enid to dedicate its municipal buildings complex in honor of Dr. King. If you are ever in Enid, please take a look at the dedicatory memorial in front of city hall on Enid’s West Owen K. Garriott Road, Highway 412, the main east-west artery.

Dr. King’s March on Washington speech is masterful. Those of us who were alive at the time can still hear Dr. King’s melodious voice uttering those wonderfully inspiring words. In that speech, he reminded us of the hope

of Scripture, the promise of the Declaration of Independence, the law of our Constitution, and the soaring rhetoric and great actions of our sixteenth president, Abraham Lincoln.

The centerpiece of the speech is Dr. King's vision for America. Some parts of his speech are more famous than others. Who can forget, for example, how he dreams that his "four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." I was in Second Grade when he spoke those words, and they have been a guiding light ever since.

But this evening I want to focus on the words Dr. King used to start the dream sequence. Focusing on the preamble to the American Declaration of Independence, he said he has "a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out

the true meaning of its creed.”

These words – what Dr. King refers to as our “creed” – define us as a nation. And, thanks to the work and lives of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and countless others, we are ever closer to making a reality the words Thomas Jefferson wrote 237 years ago in our Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

As a member of the Board of Regents, when I think of these things – the aspirations of Thomas Jefferson as espoused in the Declaration of Independence, the courage of Abraham Lincoln, the grace of Dr. Martin Luther King, and the life of Dr. John Montgomery – I am reminded of the central importance of education in general and higher

education in particular.

Each of these individuals acted upon a strong belief that education is vital. They didn't stop with their words. No. They took action based on their words.

Dr. King knew the importance of a higher education. As a young student at Morehouse College, King wrote: "To save man from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education. ... The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically."

Jefferson understood the importance of higher education. He founded the University of Virginia.

Lincoln understood the importance of higher education. He ran for president on a revolutionary platform calling for the creation of land grant institutions, to make education widely accessible. And in 1862, in the midst of

the Civil War, he signed the Morrill Act, which led to the establishment of many great institutions of higher education, including Oklahoma's two land grant schools – both governed by the A&M Regents – Oklahoma State University and Langston University.

Dr. John Montgomery has led a life that shows his dedication to higher education. He served as a member of the Kiamichi Vo-Tech Board. At its 100th annual spring commencement – and the 100th is always a big one – he received the Tuskegee Institute's Alumni Merit Award. And as a 16-year member of the Board of Regents, Dr. Montgomery led the charge to establish and erect OSU's Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

These great individuals all believed in the importance of higher education. And they backed up their thoughts with deeds. In my judgment, we have a duty to carry the

higher education torch forward.

It's hard for me to imagine anything we do as a society that is more important than higher education. I grew up in an age when the importance of obtaining a higher education was a given. Nearly everyone knew that getting a college degree was important. No one had to talk about the value of attending college; we simply assumed that obtaining a college education was a key to a successful life. To be sure, a higher education was out of reach for many. Over the years, our society has tried to change that, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. But everyone assumed, everyone knew, that supporting higher education was vital.

A simple review of the numbers bears out what we know intuitively. In 2011, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for those

who had not finished high school was 14.1%. For high school graduates, it was 9.4%. But for college graduates, it was only 4.9%. And it was only 2.4% for holders of a professional degree.

Comparing annual incomes shows much the same thing. High school graduates in 2011 earned \$40,900. College graduates, by contrast earned almost \$70,000. And, on average, those with a professional degree earned a whopping \$146,163.

Bear with me for one more set of numbers. According to the United States Census Bureau, in a lifetime, a typical high school graduate will earn \$1,455,253. By contrast, a college graduate will almost double that, earning \$2,567,174. And those with professional degrees will double that again, and earn \$5,254,193.

Does a higher education make a difference? We all

know it does, and the numbers agree.

Yet, in some quarters today, one hears grumblings about public support for higher education. Many today doubt the value of a higher education. To put it bluntly, in the public arena, higher education is under attack. Make no mistake about it. There are people – some in positions of power – who want to completely alter higher education in America. Some even aim to drastically cut, if not completely defund, public higher education, and seem bent on doing so without regard to the consequences.

If you have to choose between Abraham Lincoln and today's nay-sayers, my advice is to go with Lincoln. Some things are worth spending money on. As Lincoln knew, preserving the Union, freeing the slaves, and expanding educational opportunities are among those things.

Creating land grant institutions made higher

education, previously restricted almost exclusively to the wealthy, much more broadly available. The Morrill Act of 1862 describes the land grant mission as funding institutions of higher education “where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, ... to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, ... to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”

Well, nothing succeeds like success. And the land grant schools have certainly succeeded. Consider our two great land grant universities, OSU and Langston.

Oklahoma State University, founded in 1890, is the state’s oldest land grant institution. For the second year in a row, OSU is currently experiencing a record enrollment.

This is so, I believe, because Oklahoma State

embraces its land grant mission as the people's university. Think about the OSU seal. It includes a triangle, and on the sides of the triangle are the words, Instruction, Research and Extension. Those words – Instruction, Research and Extension – mean that Oklahoma State University should 1. be accessible to students, 2. enable students and professors to engage in meaningful research, and 3. take the collective knowledge and work of the institution and improve the lives of us all.

OSU succeeds well in its mission. Consider just a couple of its programs. The New Product Development Center, for example, links the innovative ideas and capabilities of small- and medium-sized manufacturers with the knowledge and technical expertise of the land grant university faculty, staff and students. The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service provides educational

programs and assistance to help Oklahomans solve local issues and concerns, promote leadership and manage resources wisely. The Robert M. Kerr Food and Agricultural Products Center provides research laboratories, pilot-processing facilities, educational programs and seminars, and access by the citizens of our great state to faculty and staff with expertise in business and technical disciplines.

OSU is a recognized leader for cutting edge technologies such as unmanned aerial systems research. On top of that, OSU has the lowest tuition among the Big 12 schools in this region and this year, for the second time in the last five years, there was no tuition increase.

Langston University is a special place. It too is a land grant university, founded in 1897 under the second Morrill Act. Worldwide, Langston is probably best known for its

Institute for Goat Research. I could also easily mention lots of other Langston programs – for example, we could discuss the urban mission of Langston’s Tulsa and Oklahoma City branch campuses, which Dr. John Montgomery helped start, or some of the cutting-edge genetic research taking place on the main campus.

But instead, I would like to talk about Langston’s unique mission and status within Oklahoma’s higher education system. For, as the only HBCU in Oklahoma, and westernmost of all HBCUs, Langston is extraordinarily special.

Langston – to borrow tonight’s theme – has been bridging the gap for generations of Oklahomans. Langston alumni repeatedly tell that story. And, whenever I am on campus, I see Langston doing the same thing today. Students at Langston enjoy a personal, mentoring

relationship with faculty, staff and administration. From my perspective, this is a vital part of the college experience that, unfortunately, is lacking today on most campuses.

Langston, I am happy to report, is in excellent financial shape. And it has a significant endowment fund. But Langston continues to need financial and other support from its various constituencies. And one way you can lend your help to Langston is to support the efforts of Langston's new president, Dr. Kent J. Smith.

Two years ago, I had the awesome task of heading Langston's presidential search committee. We hired a nationally respected search firm, and had the finest pool of presidential applicants I have ever seen. Dr. Kent Smith, who received his B.S. and M.S. degrees from Southern University and A&M College, and his doctorate from Colorado State University, and who previously served as a

Vice President at Ohio University, has been serving as Langston's 16th President now for a little over a year.

We are blessed to have Dr. Smith and his wife, Tiffany, at Langston. In the 14 months since arriving on campus, Dr. Smith has led Langston, among many other things, to enhance its enrollment management functions, to streamline its student services, to improve its constituent services, and to expand its donor operations. These changes and others have already borne fruit.

Did you know that Langston's freshman enrollment this year is 559, some 31% higher than last year's enrollment? That's progress.

Did you know that Langston this year hosted its inaugural VIP golf outing, and raised well over \$100,000? Those are funds Langston would not have otherwise had. That's progress.

Did you know that Langston is the only university in America – let me repeat that; the only university in America – whose Athletics Director, Mike Garrett, is a Heisman Trophy Winner? In addition to what that means for Langston athletics, that raises the profile of Langston University to a different level. That's progress.

All of these things are done ultimately to give Langston students the best educational experience possible. Great things are happening at Langston, and even better things are in store.

These are just a few of the steps Dr. Smith has already taken to lead Dear Langston to new heights. I know he is working hard to make Langston an even greater institution. Please take the opportunity to welcome Kent and Tiffany Smith to Oklahoma and to let them know you stand with them in their efforts for Langston University.

We have arrived at this place, and been handed a legacy by those who have gone before us, of making higher education widely available. Is it time to step back? Absolutely not. I, for one, think President Abraham Lincoln, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dr. John Montgomery got it right. Now is not the time to shrink back from our society's commitment to higher education. No. Now is the time to recommit ourselves, as a nation and as a state, not to diminishing higher education, but to enhancing the higher educational opportunities our up-and-coming citizens will have. Thank you, and may God bless you and your work.