

“IDEAS INTO ACTION:
A VISION FOR THE BAKER INSTITUTE”

Address by
James A. Baker, III
At
Rice University Associates Dinner

Wednesday, March 31, 1993
Houston, TX

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is always difficult for me to determine where to begin when speaking about Rice University and my family’s association with it.

The natural place to start, I suppose, is with my grandfather. As I once told a commencement audience, the tale of his association with Rice reads like the plot of a 19th-century dime novel. In it, a young New Englander heads west to seek his fortune. Poor and alone, he arrives in Texas—not the modern state in which we live but the rough and tumble Republic of Texas.

As the story unfolds, our penniless protagonist works hard. He builds a fortune. He rises in society. No doubt a consequence of his hard-working and virtuous life, he goes on to live to a ripe old age.

But he always remembers the debt he owes the people of Texas. Their kindness helped him through his adversity. Now he wants to help them. So, late in life, he arranges to bequeath his fortune. His aim is to create a great university so the youth of Texas can stay here for a college education and won’t have to go to one of those elite eastern schools.

At this point, however, the story takes a decidedly dark and dramatic twist. The tale turns to greed, conspiracy and, as Sherlock Holmes would say, “cold-blooded murder.” The old philanthropist is chloroformed to death in his own bed. His murderers forge a new will directing the estate into their own unscrupulous hands.

But everything ends well. A clever Houston lawyer helps to expose the plot, and justice prevails.

That is the story of William Marsh Rice, the founder of this university. And that Houston lawyer, of course, was my grandfather, Captain Baker.

That is how the history of the Baker family’s association with Rice began.

But the personal starting place for *my* association with Rice is quite a bit different. And while the story is far less exciting, it is one that is very meaningful to me in the most personal sense of the word.

When I was a child, Grandfather would pick me up at our house at 1216 Bissonnet and take me to the Rice football stadium. He reserved a box for all the games. And beginning in 1936, we sat in that box together, side by side—and watched ‘em lose. Together, he and I (and later my Dad and I) sat in that box and watched ‘em lose for years after that. Now that builds faith and that builds discipline. (After all, you *had* to be disciplined to go every weekend and see your team lose!)

But more important, the time we spend together did something more, it gave a very young man the opportunity to spend hours at the knee of his grandfather, to drink deep from the wisdom of his elder, and, as a consequence, to nurture his character and grow into a person who is fortunate to stand before you today.

I was privileged to have a grandfather like Captain Baker. I learned a lot from him. And what I learned always put me in good stead later in life.

Two maxims of his are particularly appropriate for us tonight. *First*, he always told me: “Work hard, study hard and stay out of politics.” Well, I always worked hard. And I certainly studied hard. And, now, despite my best efforts, I’m out of politics. I guess the lesson is: You ought to listen to your grandfather’s advice because sooner or later, when you least expect it, he’ll be right and you’ll be wrong!

Second, he once told me: “Jimmy, the only thing your family can give you is a good name. It’s up to you to keep it.” I’d like to think that I’ve listened more closely to this than his first admonition.

Now, I’m honored to be able to do my small part in extending the uniquely close relationship between the Baker family and Rice University. That’s why I was so pleased to accept Rice’s magnificent offer to create an institute of public policy in my name.

Together, I believe we can build the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy into a nationally recognized center—one that will draw statesmen, scholars, and students from around the world into its innovative and integrated activities.

My vision for the institute is simple: to build a bridge between the world of ideas and the world of action.

In my view, we need to work more diligently at nurturing the ties between these two worlds.

In the pursuit of truth, *scholars* often neglect the hard, worldly realities that impinge on ideal solutions and the day-to-day requirements that drive or constrain the statesman’s options. And in their pursuit of the public good through power, *statesmen* often are disdainful of the world of ideas, closing out all outside advice and living in a cloistered world of their own making.

The institute, in short, should bridge these two worlds. Scholars should learn firsthand from statesmen of the practical imperatives that impact policy, oftentimes making “the perfect” the enemy of “the good.” Statesmen and policymakers should hear from scholars rigorous, logical--(and always practical)--analyses of how to improve the work they do. And students, the next generation of scholars and statesmen, should be enriched through participation in this dialogue and go on to become better scholars *and* statesmen as a result.

This is a tall order. Yet I believe here at Rice we have the commitment, the resources, and above all the people to make a first-rate institute. In bridging the worlds of ideas and action, I believe the institute should pursue an integrated approach that draws together various efforts from across this campus. While we emphasize the conduct and dissemination of research that is practical and timely, we need to use the knowledge found in that process to educate students, both graduate and undergraduate. We also need to reach out beyond the university community to the local, national, and global communities. After twelve straight years in Washington, I know all too well that there is a real—and growing—need for innovative thinking from “beyond the beltway” to help break government gridlock and to change America’s role in our new world. From our vantage point here in Houston, we can have critical distance from the debates in Washington—distance enough to keep our work honest, distance not too large to make our work irrelevant.

Having served much of my time in government in positions dealing with events beyond our shores, I am equally convinced of the need to make the institute an international center. And so I hope we will have many international scholars and fellows participating in the Baker Institute.

We also hope to have an annual conference. It is my aim to make this conference as international as possible in its nature. Even when the conference focuses on an ostensible “domestic” American policy issue—for example, how to revitalize our economy—the discussion will be stronger and the results more practical if we have the full participation of an international audience.

As we try to bridge the worlds of ideas and action, our work should cover a broad range of subjects. I believe we should be flexible in our agenda.

Indeed, where possible, the institute should try to anticipate policy debates and provide rigorous, insightful analysis before an issue hits the front pages of our newspapers.

This, of course, is a broad mandate. But I believe we should err on the side of flexibility and eclecticism rather than allow the institute to become pigeonholed as a center for the narrow, “trendy” topics of the day.

Let me give you some examples of the areas where I know from firsthand experience there is a need for the world of ideas to inform the world of action.

First, the notion of leadership. Opinion polls consistently show that Americans desire “leadership.” Yet we have little understanding of what actually constitutes leadership. To borrow a phrase, everyone knows leadership when they see it—but few know how to develop it, nurture it, or protect it when we find it. More important, we have no curriculum or discipline for developing it in our youth. Too often today, a young man or woman doesn’t have an elder—as I had Grandfather—who can pass along the essential truths that are so important for building character, both in private and public life.

Second, the practice of diplomacy. When I became Secretary of State, I went through the most intensive on-the-job training I’ve ever encountered—save for my days as a U.S. Marine.

Having been insular and isolated for most of our history, Americans still tend to regard diplomacy as an unnatural act. I’d like to see the institute focus a scholarly eye on the practice of diplomacy in our age—an age of breathtakingly fast change, true global interdependence, instant communications, and international mass media.

In particular, we need to examine how new diplomatic approaches can overcome critical new challenges, such as weapons proliferations, ethnic conflicts, AIDS, refugees, and migration.

Third, I think we particularly need to focus on the economic dimensions of international relations and diplomacy. As Treasury Secretary, I’ve seen from the highest levels the complexities of our global economy. As a Houstonian, I’ve seen firsthand how the global economy can spur a boom and then cause a bust. Scholars can—and should—help our policymakers improve America’s competitiveness in the years ahead. My hope is that the Baker Institute will become one of America’s leading centers for developing ideas that make the United States more competitive, ideas that create new jobs for our people.

Fourth, as we examine how the international economy impacts our economy, I think we’ll need to broaden our studies to cover how the world beyond our shores affects our lives here at home. More than at any point in our history, events overseas determine what happens here at home, indeed who we are here at home. We need to get a better fix on the ways in which the world is impacting our polity, our society, our culture, and, above all, our values.

That brings me to my *fifth* and final example. I have emphasized the need for the institute to focus on practical and timely scholarship. But there is also the need for scholars to examine continually the philosophy behind all public policy. We need to be constantly questioning the assumptions, concepts, and theories that underpin policy. While some may argue we live in a post-ideological age, ideas will always matter because it is through ideas that we express our values. That’s why I think it’s worthwhile for the Baker Institute to examine our ideas of democracy and free markets and how they’re likely to evolve well into the 21st century.

These illustrative examples represent the types of programs and projects that I believe need to be considered by scholars and statesmen alike. More important, they need to be examined by scholars and statesmen *working together*, learning from one another and enriching us all as a consequence.

I realize I have gone on for some time, but it is hard for me to contain my enthusiasm for this joint project we're launching together. I'd like to thank you all for coming and listening to my vision for the Baker Institute. But my work is not over—and neither, I hope, is yours.

My wish is that you will join with me in the hard work of developing the Baker Institute.

Starting a nationally recognized institution from scratch will not be easy, but by pitching in together, I think we can make it work.

If we work hard, it can be done.

And if it can be done, there will be a new place here at Rice for students—and scholars and statesmen, also—to study hard.

In short, if you help me work hard, study hard, and, above all, stay out of politics, then I can be true to Grandfather Baker and at the same time carry on the Baker family's unique association with Rice.

Thank you.