An Evening Honoring Frank & Virginia Williams

Hunter Henry Center
Mississippi State University

Remarks by Frank J. Williams

November 29, 2017

I do not want to be like the attorney of whom Lincoln said could pack the most words into the least ideas of any man I know.

President Keenum, Mississippi State’s First Lady, Rhonda Keenum, our friends here at State and elsewhere. Thank you for this. Virginia and I accept this not so much for us but what we believe the Frank and Virginia Williams Collection and Lecture Series represents now and in the future. After all, it is for the students, researchers and anyone interested in our history, leadership and the middle period of our nation building.

This is what I told Mississippi State University graduates in 2011—

“Through no fault of your own, you are entering this world at a time when our nation is crippled by a distressed economy, conflicting policies and an unavoidable War on Terror. It is not your generation that is to blame. My generation is partly to blame. We let millions of citizens of this great nation fall into poverty. We left this country vulnerable, opening the door for the terrorist attacks that forever changed this nation on 9-11. And, as represented by the gridlock in Washington we are a house divided. Sometimes you will succeed, and sometimes you will fail in your endeavors. You need political courage and fire in your belly to make the best decisions and judgments. And, if you make a mistake, which all of us do, there is in this great nation, redemption and forgiveness. Do not let the possibility of failure prevent you from pursuing the success or you will lose out on the sweetest part of this dream.”

Is not the same true today?
What better antidote than the study of two men who Ron Chernow so eloquently described in his magisterial bio of Ulysses S. Grant. Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant were in sync on ending civil war, peace and reconciliation including universal education.

Now the two great leaders are here at State to be examined and act as mentors to us in our divided country.

Dr. Keenum you made this point over a year ago when you and Rhonda visited us in Hope Valley. We met in the downstairs library where, surrounded by books and pamphlets, there was no place to sit. You envisioned a center here for refuge and study.

Virginia and I, for a long time, wanted our collections to go to a college or university in the South that had no such resource to, in part, assist in healing the divisiveness in our country. Mississippi State University was that place. So, in one year, both Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant are here – not so much to teach us the art of war but to use the olive branches for peace. Both Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant were arbiters for peace and mediated before that word became current.

Lincoln on the 8th Judicial Circuit as an attorney, as a politician and in the Executive Mansion. I have always believed in Lincoln’s admonition in his “Notes for a law lecture”.

“Discourage litigation. Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you can. Point out to them how the nominal winner is often a real loser—in fees, expenses, and waste of time. As a peacemaker the lawyer has a superior opportunity of being a good man. There will still be business enough. Never stir up litigation.

A worse man can scarcely be found than one who does this. Who can be more nearly a fiend than he who habitually overhauls the register of deeds in search of defects whereon to stir up strife, and put money in his pocket? A moral tone ought to be infused into the profession which should drive such men out of it.”

Ulysses S. Grant also manifested Alternative Dispute Resolution in war—his surrender terms for General Robert Lee at Appomattox and his successful efforts at mediation of the Alabama claims against Great Britain. They both possessed empathy, political courage, trusted their judgment and were most alive in the midst of the fray of what Lincoln called “the friction and abrasion in the race of life.”
President Keenum you have created a family here at State with your progressive leadership. Virginia and I are pleased to be a part of this family.

Abraham Lincoln has said, “That the better part of one’s life consists of his friendships.” Virginia and I are honored to consider all of you friends.

Thank you and Hail State!