



## **AN ODYSSEY TO EXTRAORDINARY: PRESIDENT GOLD'S INVESTITURE REMARKS**

**SEPTEMBER 5, 2024**

Thank you, Regent Schafer — and thank you to all the Board of Regents for the trust and confidence you have placed in me. I pledge my best to fulfill this responsibility.

Today, as we gather in the people's house, we have an opportunity to celebrate the transformative power of higher education and to honor the university's rich history of service to the state and nation — while asking ourselves how we can rise to even greater heights.

To Governor Pillen: thank you for your remarks. I have enjoyed our strong working relationship over the past 10 years, and I look forward to continuing to work together. I know that we share a goal to make Nebraska the very best place to live, work, study and raise a family.

To the faculty, staff and students of the University of Nebraska, to those who have offered greetings or honored us with your musical performances or helped organize this event, to my friends, and to all Nebraskans: thank you! I am humbled to stand before you today, and I am grateful for your presence and support.

I want to share special gratitude to my family: my wife Robin of fifty years, my children Matthew and Stephanie, daughter in law Emma and my two wonderful grandchildren Claire and Jonathan, and to my parents and Robin's parents who are no longer with us.

Many thanks as well to my UNMC, UNO and Nebraska Medicine family; alumni; members of Congress; members of the Unicameral Legislature current and past; and members of the Nebraska community who brought me here for my very first visit in the fall of 2013 — and have kept me here for the past decade.

My thanks to our current and former campus chancellors, system presidents and vice presidents, community leaders, state capital team and so many others.

Thank you to Major General (Ret.) Paul Friederichs, former Joint Staff Command Surgeon and now Deputy Assistant to the President for Pandemic Preparedness — and to Assistant Secretary (Ret.) of the U.S.

Administration for Preparedness and Response and former Air Force Bronze star recipient, Dr Robert Kadlec — both also recipients of honorary University of Nebraska degrees for their service to our nation.

I wish to also thank retired four-star General John Hyten and Mrs. Laura Hyten for wearing the cloth of our nation, protecting our freedoms, for their friendship and for joining us today on their wedding anniversary.

I am truly humbled, excited, energized and inspired by this opportunity, by this day, and by each of you joining us here in the Rotunda of the Nebraska State Capitol.



This setting — the house of the people — was very intentionally selected.

It was selected, as was this date in time, exactly ten years to the day from my UNMC investiture — and exactly five years from my UNO investiture. However, this day is not about me as an individual; it is a celebration of our great university system and a recognition that we are — and will always be — of, with and for all the people of our state.

This day and historic setting also serve as a call to action — for me and for each of us — to steward our partnership with the people of Nebraska and to strengthen and launch our precious sesquicentennial legacy to new future heights. Today is a call to action to steward this great university from excellent to extraordinary.

Our university system — founded in 1869, two years after the founding of the state — was formally structured in this very building in 1968. An act of the legislature and signature of the governor began an incredible legacy on a local, statewide, national and global level; a legacy in the classroom, research labs, medical clinics, extension offices, on the hardwood and gridiron. A legacy of competing with — and competing for — the very best. A legacy of winning.

I have traveled the state over the past decade, meeting with tens of thousands of students and parents, patients and care givers, farmers and ranchers and Nebraskans from all socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as business leaders, military leaders and titans of the philanthropic community. I have traveled from Falls City to Scottsbluff and from Nebraska to Congress, the Pentagon, the White House and beyond.

I have traveled to listen carefully and learn from you — the people of Nebraska. And what have I heard and learned over and over again?

From students and parents, I have heard about the importance of high quality, accessible and affordable education at a university that provides world class faculty and staff to bring out the very best in every learner; university programs that equip, uplift and empower our next generations — that teach others how to think and not what to think; programs that protect the safety and wellness of our learners, and at the same time, enrich

and enhance their lives; a university that builds both competence and confidence in our graduates and develops alumni that engender confidence, respect and admiration by others along their life's journey.

From the broader public, I have heard about a different type of confidence. Confidence in a being a strong and sustainable economic engine; a university that builds the 21st century workforce; creates stronger partnerships across public and private sectors; competes and wins; that is both financially efficient and operationally effective; that rigorously stewards public and private investments; that sets bold and audacious goals and is never afraid to work hard, compete, and to muster every ally and resource to win — and win again and again.

A few weeks ago, I heard about Donna from her grandmother, a first-generation student from a rural community who is able to pursue her dreams to become a physician because of our affordable, quality programs. I heard from John about how the research done in our extension centers has substantially increased his feed lot production over the past decades. I heard from Bethany — one of the largest employers of our graduates — about a unique workforce pipeline that has dramatically grown her business. I heard from David about how his fourteen-year-old daughter received a diagnosis of advanced cancer and is now in complete remission.

I heard from former and current governors, members of Congress, former cabinet secretaries, members of the unicameral legislature and so many others whose careers were activated and catapulted forward by their education and experiences at the University of Nebraska. In every instance, true excellence.

However, the theme of this ceremony and historic day is not simply excellence, but the trajectory from Excellent to Extraordinary. It is based upon messages shouted loud and clear across Nebraska — our broad river valleys, from our farms to our boardrooms, from cornfields to the corners of city streets.

This theme is carefully selected to inspire momentum and a bold, deeply embedded and ever-present call to action. It is a theme selected to inspire more than incremental and opportunistic growth, but to inspire true aspirational change. I have long defined excellence as a journey, as a quest and as a destination never truly achieved — always more bold, more challenging and more inspiring.



The concept of the extraordinary requires setting and achieving lofty and aspirational goals. Extraordinary aspirations require more than a set of clearly defined goals, strategies or tactics. Aspirations of the extraordinary require a fundamentally aligned culture and a consciousness of purpose that is shared not just by some — but shared by all.

Reflecting on a decades-long surgical career experience — a career of caring for others — I have learned the power of a team. In many ways, a team is a family with a deeply embedded and shared culture. I also fully

understand and appreciate the definition of a caring professional, a trusted provider of care, into whose hands a fragile human life is placed day in and day out for decades.

These have been decades of learning, training, practice, commitment, experience and dedication — practiced and honed every single day. Patients and families never care what you know until they know that you care. In every way, I have lived a culture of caring and a culture of excellence.

And I know this culture of excellence is deeply embedded in the University of Nebraska's legacy — a history of leadership, competition and championship programs that fill countless books, archives of newspapers, journals and newscasts and is a vibrant oral history told from generation to generation of Nebraskans.

The University of Nebraska was a founding member of the Association of American Universities more than 100 years ago; the first graduate college west of the Mississippi; the creator of the first video training program in health care; and of course, home to many national and conference athletic championships.

More recently, our work in public policy, health security, early childhood education, water and food security — and countless other dimensions of academics, agriculture, national defense and medical care — continues to showcase every measure of a culture of excellence.

As Senator Fischer mentioned, when the federal government asked if the University of Nebraska was prepared to care for Ebola patients in 2014, we answered the call. When our nation's most elite military leaders like General Hyten need solutions to keep our men and women in uniform safe, they turn to the University of Nebraska. When the USDA considered where to stand up the nation's largest university-based research center — that will chart the course for the future of agricultural innovation — they chose Nebraska.

When General Friederichs and Secretary Kadlec had the desperate need to repatriate American citizens in the winter of 2020 with a new and novel viral disease, they chose Nebraska.

Generous private partners and public partners see our momentum and want to be part of it — measured in many ways, including yet another record-setting, high-engagement, and high-impact philanthropic fundraising year.

Students and their parents see and feel our positive trajectory as well and want to be part of it. We are turning a corner on enrollment, despite the demographic and economic challenges facing higher education across our nation.

And yet, our greatest mistake would be to rest on our laurels and say that “excellent is good enough.” Our legacy of excellence is a solid foundation to build upon, but it is not adequate. Our legacy serves as an inspiration — but not as a roadmap — for the path ahead.



Leadership change — particularly university presidential change — is an opportunity to reflect, look carefully in the mirror and to reassess today's challenges and opportunities with an unvarnished view. We must chart a course that is new and bold and that is a pathway to a better tomorrow — to an extraordinary tomorrow.

We must not just chart a pathway to sustainability. We must chart a true expedition and quest to an odyssey. Webster defines an odyssey as “a journey or voyage undertaken by one or many, a journey for a particular purpose, pursuing an arduous journey from one place to another with a higher purpose.” An odyssey will take us from excellent to extraordinary.

Based on my travels over the past 10 years — and especially the past 10 weeks — I know that Nebraskans expect that their university to set bold and audacious goals for our odyssey to extraordinary.

These bold goals must include student retention and degree completion; the scope, excellence and impact of our research; endless discovery and creative activity; workforce development and economic impact; new and trusted partnerships and the confidence of public and private supporters across all sectors. Nebraskans expect us to set bold goals for a university wide culture that supports and embraces all who join us on our odyssey to extraordinary.

Today, let us begin to define the coordinates, outline the corridors, and create a vision for our odyssey that we will share together.



Our odyssey must start with a careful assessment of where we are today, where we have been for more than 155 years, and even more importantly, where we have breadth and depth of excellence, momentum and deeply committed human talent.

Our odyssey must be informed by the very best peer institutions, so we learn from both the triumphs and failures of others. This must not be merely our higher education peer groups, but other aspirational peers worldwide. Peers not only in higher education, but leaders across the business, government, military, artistic and athletic communities, as well as across all the private and public sectors here in the U.S. and around the world.

Our odyssey must be empowered by collaboration, partnerships and teamwork across the entire educational spectrum — from early childhood through higher education, continuous lifelong learning and the endless quest for human reinvention. We must consider partnerships across every sector of education, business and government to shape and strengthen all aspects of our collective future.

Our odyssey must be engaged with all whose voices of experience, aspirations and yearnings and passion for a better future ring clear. We must embrace the critical ability to both hear and to listen with humility, to communicate with supporters and critics alike with transparency, and to endlessly course correct while maintaining a focus on the only true horizon — extraordinary excellence.

Our odyssey must also be supported by strong and secure interactions of human learning and machine learning. This critical high-tech, high-touch interface will define every aspect of our ability to deliver on our promises, accelerate our rate of change, measure our outcomes and continuously facilitate unprecedented innovation.

Our odyssey must be powered by high energy and a wide myriad of resources including human power, facilities and technology. It must be powered by the confidence and engagement of our key stakeholders: the citizens of our state, our alumni and families, our students, and ever so critical, our faculty and staff who make it all possible. We must always steward the trust of our public and private stakeholders by wise investment of our precious time, talent and treasure.

And finally, our odyssey must always be focused on a clear, easy-to-understand and easy-to-describe horizon with clearly established priorities. A horizon that is a loud, bold call to action and is extraordinary in every way. A horizon that is solidly embodied in every classroom, every research laboratory, every extension office, every medical clinic and on the hardwood and gridiron at every athletic event. A horizon that is worthy of the national news and in ways never recognized or recorded. A horizon that is expressed by every member of our faculty and staff, is experienced and empowers every student, is a source of pride for every alum and inspires every individual and community whose lives we impact every day.



Ladies and gentlemen, this odyssey before us may seem challenging, daunting or improbable — but it is also exciting and empowering. It is filled with both certainty and a healthy dose of the unknown. As President Lincoln said, “The only way to truly see the future is to build it.”

We will build a future — just as it was built by those who left their colonial homes over one hundred and fifty years ago and ventured west across uncharted trails and vast plains, wide rivers and soaring mountain peaks, to till the fertile soil and become the communities and cultures we cherish today as Nebraskans.

This odyssey is based upon a clear horizon filled with hope, empowered by an expectation to build a better life, and guided by certainty that the tools of strong commitment, hard work and personal sacrifice will guide us through the unknown into an exciting and fulfilling future. Just as our forefathers who crossed the oceans, rivers and plains in tightly-knit family and community groups, we are on this odyssey together — as a family and community of Nebraskans.

At this time, here in the house of the people of Nebraska, joined by my beloved family, colleagues and friends, I hereby accept the University of Nebraska presidential medallion with great pride and humility. This medallion is symbolic of this formal investiture, symbolic of my personal responsibility and commitment, and symbolic of the odyssey that we now share together.

Thank you for joining us on our odyssey from excellent to extraordinary.