

Bonfire Announcement  
February 4, 2002

I wish to thank you for being with us today. My purpose is to report to you my decision on whether or not we will have a bonfire in the fall of 2002.

Before I begin, I would like to commend our students for their patience and understanding during the past eighteen months as we have sought to develop a plan for Bonfire 2002 with the parameters that I established. This process was necessary to ensure that we carefully and comprehensively examined all aspects of bonfire to determine if we could have Bonfire 2002 with a certainty of safety that would ensure the welfare of our students.

My decision is based upon the criteria and guidelines I described in a press conference in this room on June 16, 2000. Rather than repeat a lot of the material in that statement today, we have copies for your reference. We also have copies of my statement at the press conference on May 2, 2000 which was held after the Bonfire Commission findings were made public.

On those two occasions, I made a few points that I do feel are worthy of repeating. Briefly:

- Everything we have done on this campus since November 18, 1999 has been affected by that horrible event.
- Every time we discuss any aspect of the bonfire, the families of the victims are forced to relive the horror of that day.
  - I am sorry that, today, we are adding to their sadness.
- I accepted responsibility for what happens at Texas A&M University.
  - Today, I am exercising this responsibility.
- I accepted the findings of the Bonfire Commission.
- I described a guiding principle that would control my decision on the bonfire.
  - I would do what is best for the university and its students.
    - I was and am still determined that the horror of the bonfire collapse will not visit our campus again.
- I reminded everyone in attendance at both press conferences that we are an academic institution of exceptional quality.
  - We will do nothing which diminishes this fact.
- I talked about something we call the Aggie Spirit.
  - I explained that the bonfire is but one manifestation of the Aggie Spirit.
    - The bonfire is not the defining characteristic of Texas A&M University.
- I talked about the obligation I feel to protect the uniqueness of this special university.
- I tried to explain the conflicted emotions I had then (and still have) as I contemplated the future of the bonfire.

- I explained how my heart wanted to continue the bonfire but how I also know my brain had to make that decision.
  - I know I have not been alone in dealing with this conflict.
- In the past year and a half I have spoken to literally hundreds of Aggie groups.
  - I always explained the feelings in my heart.
  - I find that Aggies everywhere are burdened with the same conflict.
- My emotional feelings about wanting the bonfire to continue should be known by anyone who is listening.
- I explained that the bonfire, if continued, must be a “student activity.”
  - I acknowledged that the tragedy of November 18, 1999 forever changed what we mean when we talk about a student activity.

On June 16, 2000, I agreed to allow the planning for a 2002 bonfire subject to several conditions. These conditions are listed in my statement of that date, and I believe they are being projected on the screen for your information as I speak. One obvious implication of these conditions is that the University was taking from the students controls and decisions that had previously been theirs. Controls and decisions that had belonged to the students for longer than any of us have been alive. I stated that if we were to have a bonfire, the students were no longer going to control the following activities, among others:

- The cut.
  - There would not be one.
- The acquisition of logs.
  - We would buy them.
- The Bonfire design and the Bonfire construction plan.
  - They would be created by licensed professionals.
- The Bonfire safety program.
  - It would be created by licensed professionals.
- The Leadership selection process.
- The management and control of the construction site.

These conditions changed the definition of “student activity.” For all practical purposes, these conditions only left the implementation of the project in the hands of the students.

I know these conditions, and the changes they forced, have not been popular among the students. While we still hear a significant protest from some sectors, the vast majority of our students and former students have made peace with the reality that the bonfire must change. I thank them for their understanding.

I know that some support the restructured bonfire only because they believe, over time, the old bonfire can return. The reality, which the majority understands, is that the old bonfire ended on November 18, 1999.

The massive restructuring of the bonfire was presented to the students and the Former Students in two opinion surveys during the past few weeks. The response from both communities has been overwhelming in support of the restructured bonfire. Admittedly, the surveys were intentionally limited in their scope. They did not ask, for example, “Would you like to go back to something like the old bonfire?” All of us are pleased that 98% of the student respondents agreed or strongly agreed that safety was an important feature of future bonfires. We are pleased that every class year from 1938 to 2002 was represented among the over 18,000 former students that responded to their survey.

During the past almost eighteen months, a taskforce of students, faculty and staff has planned Bonfire 2002. Their work has been made totally public through the use of public forums and frequent postings on the internet. If you have followed developments, you know that a design has been created, a construction plan is virtually complete and the new leadership selection process has been completed. These successes represent most, but regrettably not all, of the components of the required plan.

As many of you who have been following the work of the taskforce will know, we have experienced problems.

- Two safety consultants would not work on the project out of concern for legal liability.
  - In order to illustrate the difficulties intrinsic to finding help from a safety expert, you need to know that, after our initial safety consultant withdrew, 693 engineering and safety firms were sent personal notices of bid opportunity encouraging their response to an opportunity to bid on serving as our safety consultant. We received one favorable response from a firm that was subsequently judged to be unqualified for this project.
- I think all of you know that the estimated costs of Bonfire 2002 are large. A few weeks ago, we estimated these costs to be in the range of \$1M to \$1.5M.
  - While we know that the costs of future bonfires, after 2002, will not be as great, we nonetheless have received criticism for even contemplating such an expensive project.
    - These criticisms are understandable, especially given the well known budget problems the University faces.

I would now like to get to the reason we are all here today. I want you to focus on three closely linked issues:

- Professionally created Safety Plan
- Cost
- Legal Liability

These three linked issues cause me to tell you today that there will not be a Bonfire 2002.

I would like to speak to each of these before I invite questions.

- Professionally created Safety Plan
  - Our most recent safety consultant has withdrawn from the project. His firm was unable to obtain insurance. We are unable, under state law, to hold him harmless.
    - Thus, our goal to have a licensed safety professional involved throughout the construction has not been fulfilled.

This issue, alone, is sufficient to justify my decision. There are two other important considerations as well.

- Cost
  - In recent days, we have received additional information on future costs.
    - We now estimate costs for Bonfire 2002 in the range of as much as \$2.5M, and, for future bonfires, beyond 2002, in the range of \$1.3M.
  - Advocates of the bonfire are highly skeptical of these numbers. Some have even suggested that they are manufactured as a device to kill the bonfire.
    - On the screen is a summary of what we have paid to date and our estimates for completing the 2002 project. We are prepared to defend these numbers.
    - Recognizing that our problem with a Safety Plan is sufficient to justify my decision, we, none the less, invite skeptics to show us the errors in our estimates.
      - To facilitate that discussion, should it occur, we will be posting on the web, in downloadable form, a complete summary of all expenses and estimated expenses.
    - I call your attention to the estimates for insurance. Our best estimate for \$20M in liability insurance for students and staff for one year is \$425K. This estimate is based upon bids we have received.
  - We simply cannot spend this much money to construct a bonfire.
- Legal Liability
  - The costs just summarized are a product of the commitment that we must have a forever-safe bonfire. They also reflect the reality that the legal liability for all participants is enormous. This liability is a legacy of the horror of November 18, 1999. It is a reflection of the society within which we live.
    - You need to know that everyone who might have a responsible role in Bonfire 2002 has asked how the University will protect them from legal liability. This comment applies to consultants, to University employees and to students.
      - The answer is that we have not found a way other than insurance, and the cost of insurance is enormous.

In simplest of terms, the conditions I gave in June of 2000 have not been met, in spite of the dedicated work of the Bonfire Taskforce. As I judge the facts today, without an acceptable Safety Plan, the limited role that has been preserved for students, namely implementation, still carries a danger above what we can tolerate. Also, as we struggle to reach our safety goals, the costs grow beyond our reach. Finally, another driver for costs is the management of legal liability.

This decision, while extremely difficult for me and many others, is going to be very unpopular. Our community wants a bonfire. I wish I could make it happen.

I have a special compassion for the student members of the Bonfire Taskforce. They have vested a major portion of their last years in college in an effort to save a tradition for all future Aggies. I will fully understand if they do not agree with this decision. I am saddened by the reality that students that I dearly care for will now leave the university with the bonfire decision standing between us.

When I made my announcement, on June 16, 2000, that there would not be a Bonfire 2000 and a Bonfire 2001, the Aggie community was comforted by the prospect of a Bonfire 2002. I fully understand that my decision today might result in expressions of emotion, some of which will be directed at me. I do not know how to avoid these reactions.

I am also emotionally caught up in the idea that the bonfire is a great tradition. I am sad today that I am compelled to make a difficult decision. I am sad for our students and for our University.

I do call on the Aggie community to understand that the past year and a half have been controlled by a desire of everyone to have a Bonfire in 2002. Some will not believe this, but their beliefs do not change reality. Nobody is happy today.

Life is full of challenges, and it confronts all of us with circumstances that we would rather avoid. The bonfire is such a circumstance for me. My heart does not like what my brain is doing today. It would be irresponsible for me to listen to my heart when we are dealing with the safety of our students.

I anticipate that some will ask about the possibilities of a bonfire in 2003 and later. My decision only speaks to 2002. I will not be President of A&M after this June, and it is natural that I will not do anything today to take away options for the future.

If you were to ask my opinion about the possibility of a bonfire in later years, I would have to explain that my opinion has no value. The views of a former president are no more controlling than the views of any other member of the Aggie Community.

During the past 18 months, I have often heard that it is not the construction of the stack that made bonfire important. It was asserted that the bonfire was important because of the fellowship and camaraderie that came from thousands of students working in

unison on a challenging project. My advice, for whatever the advice of a lame duck President is worth, is that the students face the inevitable and focus their energy on creating a new challenge, a new tradition. I believe that with a little effort another tradition can be created which has the benefits of Bonfire but does not carry the danger, on the one hand, or the expense, on the other.

In my remaining years at A&M, as a faculty member, I hope to see this new tradition take root.

I would be pleased to try to answer your questions.