

2004

Agriculture Builders of Nebraska Annual Meeting

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Owens, John, "Agriculture Builders of Nebraska Annual Meeting" (2004). *John Owens: Speeches & Appearances*. 112.
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Agriculture Builders of Nebraska Annual Meeting
Noon Luncheon
Cornhusker Hotel
John Owens
NU Vice President and IANR Harlan Vice Chancellor
January 14, 2004

Anthony McAuliffe was acting commander of the 101st Airborne Division during the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. December 22, 1944, he was in charge of "the-defense" of Bastogne when advancing German forces called upon his garrison to surrender.

McAuliffe's initial response to the fellow ^{AMERICAN} soldiers around him was: "Aw, Nuts!"

When a written reply to the Germans' demand to surrender was needed, he could think of nothing else more appropriate to say than his original response. As you most likely remember, he wrote: "To the German Commander: NUTS! The American Commander."

The Americans successfully held Bastogne, and Anthony McAuliffe made his way into world history for a one-word reply

exemplifying the courage and fierce determination of a people with "absolutely" no intention of surrendering.

Nuts.

I think of McAuliffe's response "each time" I read one of those stories written by really big newspapers on the coasts of our great nation - not that I'll mention any names - the *New York Times* - that suggest those of us here in Nebraska and throughout the Great Plains, from the top of North Dakota where my oldest son coaches basketball down through the Texas Panhandle where my Mom still farms, are going to disappear like a tumbleweed carried out of sight by the wind.

A story published Dec. 1, under the headline "Amid Dying Towns of Rural Plains, One Makes a Stand," began this way:

"When death comes to a small town, the school is usually the last thing to go. A place can lose its bank, its tavern, its grocery store, its shoe shop. But when the school closes, you might as well put a fork in it."

That paragraph set the tone as the *New York Times* told its readers of the depopulation of the Great Plains. The story, which took Superior, Nebraska, as its base, contained a number of sobering, serious facts we cannot and, indeed, we do not take lightly: *“In nearly 70 percent of the counties on the plains, there are fewer people than there were in 1950.... For counties close to cities or near Interstate highways, the prospects are good, and population and jobs are generally growing. But most everywhere else - about one-sixth of the landmass of the United States - populations are at modern lows and the wage gaps with cities are at record highs. ... Nebraska has the three poorest counties in the nation. ...”*

The story echoes issues [“]heard[”] in the listening sessions that we in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources held across Nebraska in the past nine months. It highlights [“]the huge[”] challenges before us - but huge challenges are not new to Nebraska. Huge challenges have faced those living in our state since its very beginning. Certainly the people in this room have

faced *HUGE* challenges in the past two years in the hard work to keep the ship of state afloat, and sailing. You've done it with courage and with determination. "Thank you" for that.

When I read articles such as the December story in the *New York Times* - and incidentally, we understand they're coming back "this-year" to explore "plains problems" even more - I see something missing. Numbers such as those "they-quote" certainly are important, but numbers "seldom" tell the whole story. The late Robert Kennedy put it this way in talking about gross national product, and I quote: "Too much and too long, we seem to have "surrendered" community excellence and community values in the mere "accumulation" of material things. Our gross national product ... if we should judge America by that - counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts "special-locks" for our doors and the jails for those who break them. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and the loss of our natural-wonder in chaotic

sprawl. It counts ... the television programs which glorify violence in order to "sell toys to our children.

Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include ... the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, "in short," except "that" which makes life worthwhile."

Robert Kennedy certainly was correct because numbers do not capture the quality, the courage, the fierce determination, and the dedication of the people in Nebraska "today" who are working from both our rural and our urban areas to buck the trends the *New York Times* describes. We **are** a state with rural and urban areas, **not** a state with rural or urban areas. We **must** be One Nebraska. Enlightened self-interest tells us, as we look down the years, that Nebraska cannot be "one" pitted against the "other" if we wish to survive. We are, each one of us,

“*dependent*” upon the other, because it is going to take all of us, working together, to keep Nebraska strong.

When the Institute held listening-sessions across Nebraska last year as part of our process of updating our strategic plan, we heard “two-concerns” expressed again-and-again, in both rural and urban areas alike. Those concerns are: 1) economic development and community vitality; and 2) water. We will place increased emphasis on these areas in the University in the next few years, building on the research, teaching, and extension education programs we’ve already established.

Through research we discover new knowledge to help meet Nebraska’s concerns. We “teach” that new knowledge in our classrooms and in our laboratories. We also “teach it” in all 93 Nebraska counties through extension education programs, providing knowledge Nebraskans can put to immediate use in their lives.

We expect all the diverse work we do in the Institute will contribute toward meeting Nebraskans’ concerns, statewide.

Certainly the tremendous work conducted by our scientists concerning ways to control *E. coli* 0157:H7 in feedlot cattle, work that was reported worldwide last October, is an example of that, with its implications both for producers' profits and for consumers' health.

The annual Nebraska Rural Poll, which was conducted this past year, [”]detected one of those facts that concerns me most as reported in the *New York Times* story. It is the finding that rural Nebraskans reported themselves as more pessimistic about both their individual well-being and their communities than they had been a year earlier. You and I [”]both-know[”] that, too often, when people feel powerless, they actually become powerless, because of their belief that they are powerless. That is a trend we must work to turn around as quickly as possible. Optimism is vital. Hope is part of our heritage and our future. It wasn't pessimists who dreamed the dreams that built our state. It isn't pessimists who drop seeds in the ground

and await the sprout. It isn't pessimists who open new businesses, or find new ways to make businesses grow.

Believing "we" can make a change is absolutely essential to changing. It is essential that we fan that belief in Nebraska, all of us who think this is a good place to be, and to grow. We must listen not to the voices of those predicting a bleak future, but to our own voices, describing the future we wish to see, and determining the ways we will get there.

I think a huge advantage we in Nebraska have going for us is the people in this room today, and others just like you, who would never surrender the fight to make Nebraska productive and viable for the future. Every day on campus I see "quality-students" with strong work ethics who will become big contributors to our state. For example, over 70 percent of "all Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and Human Resources and Family Sciences" graduates take their first job in Nebraska. Certainly these young professionals just entering the American economy have the talents and skills to live and

work elsewhere, but they *choose* to stay here. That is enormously encouraging to me when I “contemplate” Nebraska’s future.

Every day I work with faculty and staff at Nebraska’s land-grant university who are dedicated to our state, and to providing it with a solid future. When the *New York Times* reporters write their stories they don’t know these people, as they don’t know you, but I do, and that knowledge gives me hope.

We take our land-grant university mission responsibilities very seriously at the University of Nebraska. We know this “powerhouse” of an agricultural state depends upon us for help in keeping Nebraska a leader in food production and safety, as well as for knowledge “necessary” to preserve our natural resources and strengthen our youth, families, and communities. When it comes to “lead, follow, or get out of the way,” we intend to continue as leaders for Nebraska’s future, “partners” with other Nebraska leaders also working toward a

safe and secure future for our state. And we will do all of this with programs that blanket the entire state which, thankfully, as One Nebraska is composed of both rural and urban areas.

I would be remiss today if I did not "thank" each of you here who makes it possible for us to do our work on Nebraska's behalf. I thank Ag Builders of Nebraska for their unwavering support for the ^{ENTIRE} University and for their belief in the work we do. I thank our elected officials who realize the importance of this great university to our state and who have, in the past two difficult, difficult years, "preserved" as much of Nebraska's land-grant university as you found possible. Your vision and your understanding of the university's role in developing Nebraska's future also give me great hope.

The idea of surrendering Nebraska's future is as "laughable" as it is unthinkable. Or, as Commander McAuliffe would put it: "Nuts."

Thank you.