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REMARKS OF
ELMER B. STAATS
COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
ON THE OCCASION OF THE
1980 HARRY S. TRUMAN SCHOLARSHIP
FOUNDATION AWARDS CEREMONY

["ALWAYS DO RIGHT"]

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI
MAY 4, 1980

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I AM VERY PLEASED TO BE WITH YOU TODAY AT THIS AWARDS PRESENTATION AND TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS THE 79 RECIPIENTS OF THE 1980 HARRY S. TRUMAN FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIPS. THIS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM IS FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE DEMONSTRATED A FIRM COMMITMENT TO A CAREER IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE. AS A PARTICIPANT IN AND A CLOSE OBSERVER OF THE FEDERAL SCENE FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS, I LOOK FORWARD TO THE CONTRIBUTIONS YOU WILL MAKE AT ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT. OUR NATION NEEDS CITIZENS WHO CARE DEEPLY ABOUT THE POLICIES AND OPERATIONS OF THEIR GOVERNMENT. MORE THAN THAT IS REQUIRED, HOWEVER, BECAUSE THE EXECUTION OF PUBLIC POLICIES AND PROGRAMS WILL SUCCEED ONLY IF GOOD PEOPLE ARE ATTRACTED

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TO THE PUBLIC SERVICE.) WE NEED PEOPLE WHO LOOK UPON THE PUBLIC SERVICE AS MORE THAN JUST ANOTHER JOB. WE MUST HAVE PEOPLE WHO ARE DEDICATED TO MAKING GOVERNMENT WORK BETTER, WHO ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE HUMAN CONDITION, AND WHO ARE WILLING TO CONTRIBUTE "SOMETHING EXTRA"--EVEN AT PERSONAL SACRIFICE. WE NEED PEOPLE WHO ARE WILLING TO TAKE RISKS AND TO INNOVATE. AND PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANTLY, WE NEED PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF THE MANAGER OR EXECUTIVE IN WHAT WILL ALWAYS BE A POLITICAL SETTING, WHERE CONTROVERSY WILL EXIST, WHERE CRITICISM WILL BE RENDERED, AND WHERE MORAL CHOICE IS FREQUENTLY NECESSARY. IN SHORT, WE NEED MORE PEOPLE IN GOVERNMENT WHO ARE COMMITTED TO THE SURVIVAL OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS--AND WHO ARE WILLING TO ACT UPON THEIR CONVICTIONS THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREERS.

HARRY TRUMAN WAS SUCH A PERSON. IN PUBLIC LIFE, HE ALWAYS DID WHAT SEEMED TO HIM TO BE BEST TO DO, NO MATTER WHAT THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER IT WOULD BE POPULAR OR ACCEPTABLE AT THE POLLS. THIS PHILOSOPHY WAS EXEMPLIFIED BY A SIGN ON HIS DESK. MOST PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT THE OTHER SIGN THAT SAID, "THE BUCK STOPS HERE." BUT HE ALSO HAD A SIGN ON HIS DESK WITH A QUOTATION FROM MARK TWAIN THAT SAID, "ALWAYS DO RIGHT. THIS WILL GRATIFY SOME PEOPLE AND ASTONISH THE REST."

HARRY TRUMAN ALWAYS DID WHAT HE THOUGHT WAS RIGHT, AND HE EXPECTED THIS OF OTHERS. IN FACT, HE FIRED MANY OF HIS

CABINET MEMBERS BEFORE THIS KIND OF ACTION BECAME SO POPULAR. HE ONCE SAID, "I PROPOSE TO GET CABINET OFFICERS I CAN DEPEND ON AND HAVE THEM RUN THEIR AFFAIRS, AND WHEN I CAN'T DEPEND ON THEM, I'LL KEEP FIRING CABINET MEMBERS UNTIL I CAN GET THAT KIND." HE WAS AS GOOD AS HIS WORD: IN 7-1/2 YEARS, TRUMAN HAD 34 PERSONS IN HIS CABINET, COMPARED WITH EISENHOWER'S 16 CABINET MEMBERS IN 8 YEARS.

AFTER HE LEFT THE WHITE HOUSE, PRESIDENT TRUMAN WAS ASKED TO WHAT HE WOULD ATTRIBUTE HIS LONG AND REMARKABLE LIFE. HE REPLIED:

"I NEVER HAD THE NOTION THAT I WAS ANYTHING SPECIAL AT ALL; EVEN WHEN I GOT THAT JOB IN THE WHITE HOUSE ...AND I NEVER HAD THE NOTION THAT THERE WEREN'T A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO COULDN'T DO WHATEVER IT WAS BETTER THAN I COULD.

"BUT THAT NEVER WORRIED ME. ALL THAT EVER CONCERNED ME WAS THAT I WANTED TO DO IT AS BEST I COULD ...I ALWAYS TRIED TO BE SATISFIED WITH WHAT I WAS AND WHAT I WAS DOING."

BUT TRUMAN WAS INDEED SPECIAL. UNLIKE YOU, HE NEVER ATTENDED COLLEGE, ALTHOUGH HE DID GO TO LAW SCHOOL AT NIGHT FOR 2 YEARS. HE PRIDED HIMSELF ON HAVING READ ALL 3,000 BOOKS IN HIS HOMETOWN LIBRARY, AND, AS PRESIDENT, ENCOURAGED PEOPLE IN GOVERNMENT TO EXPAND WHATEVER FORMAL EDUCATION THEY HAD BY READING AND LEARNING FROM OTHERS.

AFTER PRESIDENT TRUMAN APPOINTED ME DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF THE BUDGET, I MET WITH HIM FAIRLY FREQUENTLY TO DISCUSS VARIOUS ISSUES ABOUT THE BUDGET, GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS, GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION, AND PROPOSED LEGISLATION. I WAS ALWAYS IMPRESSED BY HIS ENORMOUS SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY AND COMMITMENT TO TAKING ACTION IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST--DOING WHAT WAS THE RIGHT THING TO DO.

I OFTEN RECALL AN EXCHANGE OF LETTERS WHICH I HAD WITH PRESIDENT TRUMAN AFTER HE HAD APPOINTED ME THE NUMBER 2 MAN IN THE BUREAU OF THE BUDGET IN 1950. HE ANNOUNCED THE APPOINTMENT DURING A CHRISTMAS VACATION WHILE HE WAS IN KEY WEST. I WROTE HIM A NOTE OF APPRECIATION, BUT REMARKED THAT I WAS SOMEWHAT SURPRISED BY THE APPOINTMENT SINCE HE WAS NOT EVEN AWARE OF MY POLITICS. SHORTLY, A REPLY CAME BACK WITH THE STATEMENT THAT HE DIDN'T HAVE THE SLIGHTEST INTEREST IN MY POLITICS; ALL HE WAS INTERESTED IN WAS WHETHER I COULD DO THE JOB, AND HE WAS SATISFIED THAT I COULD. INCIDENTALLY, HE APPLIED THE SAME PRINCIPLE TO MANY

KEY APPOINTMENTS IN HIS ADMINISTRATION, DISREGARDING POLITICS AND APPLYING THE PRIME TEST OF WHETHER THE PERSON COULD PERFORM AND CARRY OUT THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE OFFICE TO WHICH HE WAS APPOINTED.

PRESIDENT TRUMAN WAS KNOWN AS A MAN WHO WAS NEVER RELUCTANT TO MAKE DECISIONS, AND WE USED TO BRING HIM MANY DIFFICULT PROBLEMS FOR WHICH HE HAD TO MAKE DECISIONS. IN SOME CASES, HE WOULD SAY, "WELL, I JUST CAN'T DO IT. IT'S NOT RIGHT." THIS KIND OF DECISION CAME NATURALLY TO HIM; NO GREAT MORAL STRUGGLE WAS INVOLVED. AT ONE POINT, HE NOTED THAT "A MAN WHO IS INFLUENCED BY THE POLLS OR IS AFRAID TO MAKE DECISIONS WHICH MAKE HIM UNPOPULAR IS NOT A MAN TO REPRESENT THE WELFARE OF THE COUNTRY." HE HAD AN ENORMOUS RESPECT FOR THE PRESIDENCY--A RESPECT NO DOUBT HEIGHTENED BY HIS SENSE OF HISTORY OF THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT.

EVEN IN THE U.S. SENATE, TO WHICH HE WAS ELECTED IN 1934, HARRY TRUMAN WAS HIS OWN MAN. AS A MEMBER OF THE SENATE INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMITTEE, TRUMAN DIRECTED AN INVESTIGATION OF RAILROAD FINANCES. HIS STAFF FOUND DAMAGING EVIDENCE ABOUT MANY OF HIS FRIENDS IN MISSOURI, BUT HE ORDERED THE INVESTIGATION COMPLETED NEVERTHELESS.

IN ADDITION TO SETTING AN EXAMPLE FOR ME--AND OTHERS-- IN THE MANNER IN WHICH HE CONDUCTED HIS PUBLIC LIFE, TRUMAN SERVED AS A MODEL FOR ME IN ANOTHER ASPECT OF HIS CAREER.

EARLY IN 1941, THE SENATE ESTABLISHED THE COMMITTEE TO INVESTIGATE THE NATIONAL DEFENSE PROGRAM. TRUMAN HAD REALIZED THAT THE DEFENSE EFFORT CREATED MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR WASTE AND CORRUPTION, AND IN 1940, ALTHOUGH THE UNITED STATES WAS NOT FORMALLY INVOLVED IN WORLD WAR II, THE NATION'S DEFENSE SPENDING HAD RISEN TO HUGE SUMS. TRUMAN REMEMBERED THAT IT WAS NOT UNTIL AFTER WORLD WAR I THAT INVESTIGATIONS OF MILITARY SPENDING OCCURRED--AT WHICH POINT THE CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES WERE POWERLESS TO RECOVER WASTED FUNDS. THEREFORE, SENATOR TRUMAN URGED CREATION OF AN INVESTIGATORY COMMITTEE OF THE CONGRESS IN 1941. HE WAS NAMED CHAIRMAN OF THE SENATE COMMITTEE, WHICH UNCOVERED WASTE AND INEFFICIENCY, SAVED THE GOVERNMENT ABOUT ONE BILLION DOLLARS, AND GREATLY AIDED PRODUCTION NEEDED TO CONDUCT THE WAR.

THE GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE, SIMILARLY, IS CHARGED BY THE CONGRESS WITH RECOMMENDING WAYS TO REDUCE WASTE AND INEFFICIENCY, FRAUD, AND MISMANAGEMENT AND TO IMPROVE THE OPERATIONS OF OUR GOVERNMENT. GAO IS A NON-POLITICAL, NON-PARTISAN AGENCY IN THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH OF THE GOVERNMENT. IT WAS CREATED BY CONGRESS THROUGH THE BUDGET AND ACCOUNTING ACT OF 1921--THE SAME STATUTE WHICH CREATED THE BUREAU OF THE BUDGET--AND PLACED UNDER THE DIRECTION AND CONTROL OF THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES. THE 1921 ACT GAVE GAO ALL THE POWERS AND DUTIES FORMERLY HELD BY THE COMPTROLLER OF THE TREASURY BY STATUTES DATING BACK TO 1789.

THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL IS APPOINTED FOR A SINGLE TERM OF 15 YEARS BY THE PRESIDENT WITH THE ADVICE AND CONSENT OF

THE SENATE, AND CAN BE REMOVED ONLY BY IMPEACHMENT. THE 1921 ACT PROVIDED THAT THE GAO

- INVESTIGATE ALL MATTERS RELATING TO THE RECEIPT, DISBURSEMENT, AND APPLICATION OF PUBLIC FUNDS AND MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GREATER ECONOMY AND EFFICIENCY IN PUBLIC EXPENDITURE;
- MAKE INVESTIGATIONS AND REPORTS REQUESTED BY EITHER HOUSE OF THE CONGRESS OR ITS COMMITTEES HAVING JURISDICTION OVER REVENUE, APPROPRIATION, OR EXPENDITURES; AND
- FURNISH AID AND INFORMATION REQUESTED BY THESE COMMITTEES.

THE LEGISLATIVE HISTORY OF THE ACT INDICATES THAT THE AUTHORIZING COMMITTEE INTENDED THAT THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL "SHOULD BE SOMETHING MORE THAN A BOOKKEEPER OR ACCOUNTANT; THAT HE SHOULD BE A REAL CRITIC; AND AT ALL TIMES SHOULD COME TO CONGRESS, NO MATTER WHAT THE POLITICAL COMPLEXION OF CONGRESS OR THE EXECUTIVE MIGHT BE, AND POINT OUT INEFFICIENCY."

SINCE 1921, GAO'S RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTHORITY HAVE BEEN BROADENED BY ADDITIONAL ACTS OF THE CONGRESS. FOR EXAMPLE, IN ADDITION TO REVIEWING THE ECONOMY AND EFFICIENCY OF GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES, GAO NOW EXAMINES WHETHER PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES ARE ACHIEVING THEIR OBJECTIVES. "PROGRAM RESULTS REVIEWS" CONSIDER WHETHER DESIRED BENEFITS ARE BEING REALIZED, LEGISLATIVE OBJECTIVES ARE BEING MET, AND ALTERNATIVE

APPROACHES MIGHT ACHIEVE PROGRAM OBJECTIVES MORE EFFICIENTLY OR AT A LOWER COST.

WHEN I WAS APPOINTED COMPTROLLER GENERAL BY PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON, I ASKED HIM WHAT HE CONSIDERED TO BE THE PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY OF THAT OFFICE. PRESIDENT JOHNSON, AS YOU KNOW, HAD SERVED IN THE SENATE FOR MANY YEARS AND WAS, THEREFORE, QUITE FAMILIAR WITH THE WORK OF THE GAO. HIS RESPONSE TO ME WAS AS FOLLOWS: "WHEN CONGRESS PASSES A LAW AND I SIGN IT, IT WILL BE YOUR JOB TO TELL BOTH OF US WHETHER THAT LAW HAS BEEN CARRIED OUT AS IT WAS INTENDED." I HAVE FOUND THIS CHARACTERIZATION OF THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE OFFICE A VERY GOOD ONE.

UNQUESTIONABLY, THE MOST SWEEPING CHANGE TO AFFECT OUR OFFICE WAS THE BUDGET AND ACCOUNTING PROCEDURES ACT OF 1950, SIGNED BY PRESIDENT TRUMAN. HANGING ON THE WALL IN MY OFFICE IS THE PHOTOGRAPH OF PRESIDENT TRUMAN SIGNING THIS ACT IN THE PRESENCE OF CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS; AND PROMINENT IN THE PHOTOGRAPH IS SECRETARY SNYDER, WHO HAD TAKEN A LEADING PART IN PERSUADING THE CONGRESS TO PASS THIS MOST IMPORTANT LEGISLATION. AT THE SIGNING CEREMONY, PRESIDENT TRUMAN PRONOUNCED IT: "...THE MOST IMPORTANT LEGISLATION ENACTED BY THE CONGRESS IN THE BUDGET AND ACCOUNTING FIELD SINCE THE BUDGET AND ACCOUNTING ACT, 1921, WAS PASSED ALMOST THIRTY YEARS AGO."

PRESIDENT TRUMAN'S INTEREST IN FISCAL MATTERS WAS DEEP, ATTRIBUTABLE IN PART, NO DOUBT, TO THE FACT THAT HE HAD SERVED ON THE SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE BEFORE BECOMING PRESIDENT. HE NEVER TIRED OF THE PAINSTAKING ANALYSIS AND LONG MEETINGS REQUIRED TO PREPARE THE FEDERAL BUDGET, EVEN RECALLING FROM YEAR TO YEAR THE AMOUNT WE HAD RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIFIC PROGRAMS IN PREVIOUS YEARS. HE INSISTED ON HOLDING HIS OWN PRESS BRIEFING ON THE BUDGET IN COMPANY WITH THE SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY AND THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUDGET. MOST OF THE QUESTIONS WERE ANSWERED BY THE PRESIDENT HIMSELF, WITHOUT THE HELP OF HIS TWO PRINCIPAL BUDGETARY AIDES.

THE OVERALL PURPOSE OF THE BUDGET AND ACCOUNTING PROCEDURES ACT WAS TO MAKE FEDERAL PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS TAKE ON THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR SEEING THAT BUDGET AND ACCOUNTING SYSTEMS WERE ADEQUATE TO CONTROL PUBLIC MONIES. NO LONGER WOULD GAO BE CHECKING EVERY VOUCHER. INSTEAD, WE WERE CHARGED WITH PRESCRIBING THE ACCOUNTING PRINCIPLES AND STANDARDS FOR THE FEDERAL AGENCIES' SYSTEMS AND OVERSEEING THE WAY AGENCIES CARRIED OUT THEIR FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES.

THE ROLE OF THE GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE WAS CHANGED BY CONGRESS BECAUSE EVIDENCE WAS MOUNTING THAT, EVEN THOUGH EXPENDITURES MAY WELL HAVE BEEN LEGAL, AGENCIES IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH WERE NOT ADMINISTERING THE PUBLIC MONIES IN AN EFFICIENT AND ECONOMICAL MANNER.

THUS, JUST AS HARRY TRUMAN BELIEVED THAT HE WAS ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PEOPLE, THERE WAS A GROWING RECOGNITION OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS' CONVICTION THAT ALL OF GOVERNMENT MUST BE ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PEOPLE. TRUMAN UNDERSTOOD THAT WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY, AND IN EXERCISING THAT POWER, HE NEVER FORGOT THAT IT WAS THE PEOPLE WHO HAD GIVEN IT TO HIM. HE BELIEVED THAT FREE GOVERNMENT WORKS ONLY IF THE LEADERS ALWAYS HAVE THE WELFARE OF THE PEOPLE IN MIND.

AS TRUMAN SAID TO THE DELEGATES AT THE OPENING SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE IN APRIL 1945: "IN YOUR HANDS RESTS OUR FUTURE." AS YOU PREPARE FOR YOUR CAREERS IN GOVERNMENT, REMEMBER ANOTHER OF HIS STATEMENTS: "REALLY WHAT MY JOB IS, IS JUST TO TRY TO KEEP THIS COUNTRY IN SOME SORT OF WORKING ORDER SO THAT WHEN IT COMES TIME TO TURN IT OVER TO YOU YOUNG FOLKS, IT'LL BE IN GOOD SHAPE."

SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL'S ADVICE IN 1930 TO "ALL YOUNG MEN ALL OVER THE WORLD" IS ALSO APPROPRIATE HERE:

"DON'T BE CONTENT WITH THINGS AS THEY ARE...DON'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER, NEVER SUBMIT TO FAILURE...YOU WILL MAKE ALL KINDS OF MISTAKES, BUT AS LONG AS YOU ARE GENEROUS AND TRUE, AND ALSO FIERCE, YOU CANNOT HURT THE WORLD OR EVEN SERIOUSLY DISTRESS HER. SHE WAS MADE

TO BE WOODED AND WON BY YOUTH."

THE FUTURE CLEARLY HOLDS GREAT OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOU. THE TRUMAN SCHOLARSHIPS, ALONG WITH THE CAREER-RELATED WORK-STUDY PROGRAM ANNOUNCED LAST YEAR BY THE U.S. OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT, SHOULD ENABLE YOU TO OBTAIN THE BEST EDUCATION POSSIBLE TO PREPARE YOU FOR YOUR CAREERS IN PUBLIC SERVICE. WE EXPECT YOU ALL TO BE ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE IN A MEANINGFUL, SIGNIFICANT WAY TO WORK THROUGH THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT TO IMPROVE HUMAN AFFAIRS. THIS IS THE CHALLENGE OF PUBLIC SERVICE.

WHEN YOU ARE FACED WITH DECISIONS, REMEMBER HOW HARRY TRUMAN WOULD HAVE RESPONDED: DO THE BEST YOU CAN. DO WHAT IS RIGHT. THE MOST VALUABLE ASSET OF ALL EDUCATION, AS POINTED OUT BY THOMAS HUXLEY IN 1877, IS THE ABILITY TO MAKE YOURSELF DO THE THING YOU HAVE TO DO, WHEN IT OUGHT TO BE DONE, WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT. "IT IS THE FIRST LESSON THAT OUGHT TO BE LEARNED," NOTED HUXLEY, "AND HOWEVER EARLY A PERSON'S TRAINING BEGINS, IT IS PROBABLY THE LAST THING THAT WE LEARN THOROUGHLY."

YOUR FUTURE IN THE FIELD OF PUBLIC SERVICE MAY NOT BE EASY, BUT IT WILL BE CHALLENGING AND, I EXPECT, BENEFICIAL TO OTHERS. JUST KEEP HARRY TRUMAN IN MIND, AND YOU'LL DO FINE.

THANK YOU.