

Inauguration Day Campus Event
January 20, 2009 - 10:30 am
Clark Gym

Good morning. My name is Jeremy Haefner and I am the Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at RIT. I am privileged to welcome you, our RIT community, to this gathering – a gathering to witness history in the making, the inauguration of our 44th president and our first African American President, Barack Obama.

While we gather here to witness this amazing event on television, I am comforted to know that a number of people from our RIT family are there in attendance. And it is fitting and right that this is so. Why do I say this? I say this because more than anything, RIT is about impact – impact that our graduates, you the students, have on society through the use of the skills and experience fostered here at RIT. Our graduates go out and change the world, making it a better place for all of us.

And of our next president? He too is about impact. He too will be about making the world a better place. He has to because there is so much to do. Already Barack Obama has broken the mold of presidents before him and has actively embraced the new technologies that will help drive the values he represents. Not only has he indicated the importance of education and technology as anchors for this country's future, but he himself, like the successful campaign he waged, will use technology in ways that will in many respects bring democracy actively into our homes.

I expect that in the next four years we will make substantial progress to our infrastructure that will support alternative forms of energy and transportation. By 2012, I expect it will be possible to drive across America in an electric vehicle without the use of fossil fuels. The rate of change of our global footprint will radically improve and, as a result, our international stature will be transformed. This will be our first truly technology-driven president and we, as the RIT family, stand with him today ready to solve the grand challenges and build the new future.

But of course this day is about much more than technology. The presidential inauguration is an event filled with ceremony, parades, speeches and symbolism. Far more than just a day of change, the inauguration marks the beginning of a new light, a shining beacon of change. We will not be the same country that we were yesterday. We are witnessing our own transformation. This is not Barack Obama's day; this is our day.

When he takes the oath of office, President-elect Obama will be standing on stonework laid by slaves. He will be facing the Lincoln Memorial, one of the most profound symbols of American Democracy in the world. He will appear in the National Mall where slaves were once held in pens before going up for auction. And it seems particularly poignant that the inauguration takes place just one day after Martin Luther King Jr. day and just 23 days before the 200th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth.

It is fitting that Barak Obama's inauguration theme is "A

New Birth of Freedom”, a phrase from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. In this famous speech, Lincoln expressed his hope and optimism that the sacrifice of those who died to preserve the nation shall lead to a “new birth of freedom” for our nation. This bears repeating and so permit me a small indulgence as I read just a part from this speech.

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion - - that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

It is safe to assume that that the world will NOT note what I have said here today. But we all will note what President-Elect Obama will say here today.

A better America is at the core of every inauguration. The election of Barack Obama as our president shows what is possible in America when we set race and racism aside for a greater goal.

So this is a day where we dedicate ourselves to the great tasks before us. I invite all of us, now, to let our selves be enthralled with the events of today. Let us follow this new beacon of change that will show us the way forward.