Talk at the History Association

It is a special pleasure to receive this award. It recognizes the important role of teaching, education, research and commitment to public policy. It is especially meaningful because it comes from my home city, the city I have lived in happily during most of my professional career. I hope it is true—I want to believe that it’s true-- that the local folks know you best. I am grateful to the History Association for this award.

Life has given me the wonderful opportunity to work in both the wonder-world of public policy making and the less frenetic world of the university. Both have had their attractions. Long ago I decided that it was more fun to advise officials than to be one. Although I worked in both the Kennedy and Reagan administrations, I never stayed very long. John Stuart Mill taught me the following lesson:

“The lesson given to mankind by every age, and always disregarded – that [academic research], which to the
superficial appears a thing so remote from the business of life … is in reality the thing on earth which most influences them, and in the long run overbears [most other] influences…”

Though I do not have that special status of a native, my family and I have lived in Pittsburgh for a long time. It was 46 years ago that we moved here, first to the suburbs and, in 1966, to the city itself. Life in this city has much to offer.

In my few minutes, I would like to ruminate a bit on a few of the changes that have taken place at Carnegie Mellon University, and to a lesser extent in Pittsburgh, during the 46 years we have lived here.

When I came, Carnegie Mellon did not exist. Carnegie Tech was a good regional school, known for its great football in the 1930s, its drama school and its quality engineering education. Its president, Jake Warner, was a
distinguished chemist, happy to preside over a good regional school and slowly move it forward.

A few years earlier, William Larimer Mellon had endowed a new type of business school that emphasized and taught the relevance of social science for business decisions and the need to develop new methods for management. Mellon understood that managements had to learn to understand the technical processes in their companies and that technical people had to understand how to manage people and companies. It was a bold vision at the time. Like many bold visions, it seems obvious and commonplace forty or fifty years later.

Like all bold visions, there were many steps between the idea and its successful implementation. Mellon was fortunate that President Warner gave the new business school a strong and thoughtful first dean, committed to excellence, to being best. It was that school that attracted me when I was invited to come in 1957.
Pittsburgh at the time was vibrant community, about the 9th largest metropolitan area in the United States. It had thrown off its image as the smoky city and was well along in its revitalization. It had great leadership. The city had David Lawrence, an unusually thoughtful mayor concerned about the future and Pittsburgh’s place in it. Lawrence was able to get the agreement of the diverse groups at the city and state level needed for major change. The business community had Richard King Mellon who was able to muster the support of many of his peers. Universities were a minor part of their plan. Pittsburgh did not have a great university. It didn’t even have a great football team. That too required new leadership.

Fast forward to the present. Outstanding leadership at Carnegie Mellon turned a good engineering school into a world-class university. My first dean, Lee Bach, brought Herbert Simon and Richard Cyert, two men who combined extraordinary vision, leadership and commitment to excellence. Bach, and later they brought many others.
Their unifying commitment was that good was not good enough. Progress requires excellent research to generate new ideas that transform the way the world thinks about its problems and prospects and the ways it does its work. Soon novel and exciting research, new ideas and novel extensions of old ideas began to come out of CMU at a rapid rate. Progress did not stop at the business school; it transformed the university. Many of you are familiar with some of these developments in computing, but there are many others. CMU remains an exciting place, opening new frontiers.

Experience in the public policy arena taught me that encouraging officials to adopt new ideas and new approaches required more than simply pointing to the problems and possibly errors in existing practice. It sometimes required the blunt statement of plain truths. Often, it required learning different skills, skills that avoided blunt truths, skills that did not come easily. This was a substantial challenge. My wife, Marilyn, was a great and effective teacher of the skills of persuasion.
Carnegie Mellon’s progress shows that leadership and vision succeeded even in some of the most competitive markets, the markets for outstanding students and professors. The same has been true of football teams that, like universities, must judge raw talent, deal with prima donnas and get them to work productively.

It has been true also of cities that mustered the effort, leadership and commitment, mastered the requisites for revitalization, and put them to work. Unfortunately, Pittsburgh has not been prominent among them. It has declined as a metropolitan center to 21st in size. Its aging population suggests that, without major change, its relative decline will continue.

I want to close by again thanking the History Association for this honor and acknowledging the wonderful support I have received, over many years, from colleagues and friends and most of all from my wife Marilyn.