

REMARKS BY GEORGIA TECH PRESIDENT G. WAYNE CLOUGH
South Georgia College Graduation, May 4, 2001

Thank you, Karen Melissa Dean, for that wonderful introduction. President Jackson, distinguished guests, faculty, graduates, families, and friends, it is an honor for me to be invited to speak to you on this important day.

Someone once said that the role of the speaker at a commencement ceremony is similar to the role of the corpse at a funeral. The occasion requires one, but nobody expects him to say much. So I will bear in mind that the high point of this ceremony is the presentation of your diplomas, and I will try not to delay things too much.

It is my pleasure to be here on my own recognizance, but also representing a sister institution within the University System of Georgia. Georgia Tech seeks transfers from two-year colleges like South Georgia, and you have sent us some outstanding students, like Karen Melissa Deen who is a senior majoring in mechanical engineering, and President Jackson's daughter Amanda, who graduated in 1995 and has begun a successful career at a company called Software Solutions. I hope many of you will follow in their footsteps and come to Georgia Tech.

I am also proud of Georgia Tech's long connection with Douglas and the surrounding region through our remarkable technical extension operation, the Economic Development Institute. We've had an office on Peterson Avenue for twenty years, with Sherman Dudley as its long-time director.

Although I have attended over 100 graduations in the course of my life, I never tire of the experience. I know firsthand what a truly special occasion this is for all of the graduates, parents, spouses, relatives and friends of the graduates. It is a time of great joy and happiness, and also of pure, unadulterated relief.

Tomorrow I will host the graduation ceremonies at Georgia Tech. We have two, one for B.S. degree recipients and one for M.S. and Ph.D. recipients. It is moving to see the excitement of bright students who have so much promise, and to meet the parents who have so much pride in their children. Many of you graduates will go on to additional studies, and Georgia Tech's ceremony tomorrow represents the next goal in your education. For others of you, the important educational milestone you achieve today will lead directly to a career.

No matter if you further your education in formal studies or begin your career, the need for continued learning and education is more important today than ever in history. The story of my own family is a dramatic illustration of this change. My forebears came to this part of Georgia well before the Civil War. To the best of my knowledge, not one of them ever earned a college degree, and they probably did not need one for the lives they lived.

Both my father and my mother were born into large farm families in rural Jeff Davis County. I am sure you have run into my relatives here, because there are lots of them. I would like to

recognize one of them who is with us today, my Uncle Lamar Clough, my father's brother who lives right here in Douglas.

My parents reached adulthood during the Great Depression, and although both wanted to take their education beyond high school, they could not afford to go to college. My mother managed to attend South Georgia College for one term before financial circumstances forced her to go to work. My father was not able to attend college at all, but while he was working on ocean-going freighters during the height of the depression, he studied engineering through courses offered by the International Correspondence School. Those courses, combined with a remarkable amount of good common sense, enabled him to run several businesses and become mayor of the fair town of Douglas.

My parents were convinced of the importance of education, and one of their highest goals was for their three children to go to college. They saved to make our education possible, something I have never forgotten. They stuck with me through my parent-challenging teen years and their patience paid off when I managed to settle down, and contrary to most of our neighbors' expectations, finally succeeded in my studies at Georgia Tech. My ability to stick it out at Tech even surprised me, but I would not have let my parents down for all the world. After everything they did to get me there, I owed it to them to take advantage of the opportunity they provided.

This sense of the critical importance of education and the sacrifices my parents made to provide it has stayed with me throughout my life. It is a reflection of how Aristotle defined civilization. In a civilization, he said, people pay back what their parents have done for them by making life better for their children. When each one of us does that, the collective result is human progress. That same idea was recently expressed in a popular movie entitled, "Pay it Forward." It was about repaying a kindness you received by extending it to someone else you don't even know and how this world would be a better place if everyone did that.

It is important for my generation and yours to remember the price that was paid by those who went before us to make our lives better. When you look through the fading brown pictures in the attics of your grandparents, think about how their efforts prepared the way for the remarkable standard of living we enjoy. Your presence here today means you have a debt to them and an obligation to pay it forward, which I hope you will never forget.

This is what it means to have a sense of your place in history. But there is also another more literal sense of place. I was born and raised in Douglas, and have remembered it always even as my travels have taken me to points far from this community. I remember walking barefooted in the warm sands of the coastal plain with its gentle hills covered by cultivated fields of corn and cotton, and woods of sweet smelling honeysuckle. I remember watching the fireflies in the yard at night, and listening to the crickets and the whispering of the long leaf pines in the breeze. These things stick in your memory and are part of you no matter where your travels take you.

When you grow up here in South Georgia, your childhood memories are full of the sights and sounds and smells of the natural environment. However, despite working very hard to provide a better life, my generation and those before me did not do a good job of protecting our natural heritage. Old growth longleaf pine with trees up to 500 years old used to cover this part of

Georgia. Today they are largely gone. But the beauty that still remains can be saved, and I urge you to include a respect for the natural environment in that sense of place you carry with you. As Janisse Ray wrote in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, “When we log and destroy and cut and pave and replace and kill, we steal from each other and from ourselves. We swipe from our past and degrade our future.” Pay it forward to your children and grandchildren by saving the natural beauty of South Georgia.

During my career, my family and I spent over ten years in California and we found that the large majority of those folks have little sense of history or appreciation for their roots. This realization came home to me when I was waiting for a job interview as a graduate student. I was talking with a secretary and she noticed my accent. She was curious and asked if I was from England. I guess I could have said yes, since my ancestors came to this country from England. But that was in 1635, so I said “No ma’am, I’m from Georgia.” I could see in her eyes that I’d been reduced from Cary Grant to Gomer Pyle in an instant.

Folks in California just naturally assume those of us from the rural south are not that smart. From time to time I have used this to my advantage, and it is fun to slyly prove to some hotshot from another place that, in spite of your accent, you are as good as they are. But their assumption says more about them than it does about us. It is a reflection of the sad fact that they have little sense of place or understanding of the debt they owe to others who prepared the way for their good fortune. I hope you understand that your southern roots, and the sense of your place in history that they give you, are really a special gift you can take with you wherever you go.

One of the strongest motivations I had to come back to Georgia and Georgia Tech was my sense of responsibility to help the place and institutions that meant so much to me. It was my chance to pay it forward – first and foremost by giving bright young people the same opportunity that had been given to me... and also by developing exciting new technology, promoting economic development, and helping Georgians understand what we need to do to move this state to the next level. For this reason it has been particularly rewarding to me to have helped establish the Georgia Tech Regional Engineering Program, presently based in Savannah and Statesboro, which is designed especially to help students in South Georgia who want to stay close to home obtain a Georgia Tech engineering degree.

Our state has great potential – if we are aware of our sense of place and pay it forward by preparing ourselves for a new era of technology and global competition, and if we take care to preserve the natural beauty of our land.

In closing I would like to thank you for inviting me to be with you on this momentous day. President Jackson, I would like to congratulate you and your faculty and staff on continuing your excellent efforts to maintain South Georgia College as a vital part of my hometown. I wish you and your graduates continued success.