Upon returning to your hometown on such an auspicious occasion, it is easy to become nostalgic and think of the past. Growing up in Douglas when I did was a great time for a boy who loved the outdoors and the freedom to roam. With its ready access to forests and swamps, Douglas was a place that allowed me to explore and my imagination to soar. I like to think it was a much healthier version of what kids do today with games like Dungeons and Dragons. But there were hazards for an adventurous boy to be sure, and looking back it is a bit amazing that we survived. I learned to swim in ponds where the water quality was lacking to say the least. We had to use a special stroke designed to use your hand to move stuff off the water in front of your face. We played games on the moving cars of the Georgia and Florida Railroad that ran through town. We would hitch a ride on the ladders of the freight cars as they rolled down the tracks, and especially enjoyed it when the railroad workers saw us and hollered “get off” while we laughed and thought we were invincible. And summers were fun as we shed our shoes and shirts and skirmished with mosquitoes and gnats. I am sure I would have been a lot smarter if I had not spent hours running up one road and down another following close behind the mosquito trucks spraying DDT.

In spite of it all somehow I managed to experience a wonderful childhood. For that I owe my caring mother and father who saw to it that my sister, Phyllis, my brother, Ronnie, and I not only grew up well, but also were supported so we could go to college – something they were denied in their own lives.

In those days, now so long gone that only those of us old enough can remember, life in South Georgia seemed to move slowly. Commerce was driven by the tobacco crop which was sold in August in vast warehouses by auctioneers who used a language I could not understand until they concluded with “sold to American” when the American Tobacco Company won the bid. The tobacco farmers and their families, many of whom were my relatives, looked forward to these times because they were paid hard cash for their crop, which they immediately used for purchases of school clothes and shoes for their children. The merchants of the stores on Peterson and Main converted the earnings from tobacco grown by the farmers into the commerce of the day. For many years South Georgia subsisted on this economy, one threatened mainly only by nature, which from time to time pummeled the tobacco crop with hail, or shriveled it by lack of rain.
Today, Douglas and Coffee County have made a remarkable transition from that old economy to a new one through the concerted and strategic efforts of leaders of the community. While other small towns and cities in South Georgia and elsewhere saw their better days many years ago, Douglas has thrived. You have managed to preserve the parts of the old economy that still work and add the new, including a Wal-Mart distribution center and companies like American Insulated Wire, Premium Waters, Inc., Optima Chemical Group, and Precision Castparts Corporation. And the antenna on top of the water tower is indicative of your wireless environment that connects you and your computers to the world.

I am proud to be able to say that Georgia Tech has had a role in your success. For 40 years, the offices of our enterprise Innovation Institute, locally located on North Peterson Avenue and regionally based in Albany, have provided outstanding support to your technology-based companies. In addition, our K-12 math and science program just completed a 7 day program for your teachers to help them upgrade to a new curriculum, and we will have two Coffee County High teachers in our summer program this year, to be followed by a visit of 50 of your students to our campus this fall. And, just this afternoon, President Torri Lilly and I announced a new program for students from South Georgia College to automatically be enrolled for their junior and senior years at our Georgia Tech Savannah campus to obtain engineering degrees. Beyond these programs, your talent base receives a lot of horsepower from over 30 of our alumni, including folks like Francis Lott; Sherman Dudley; Shep Johnson, pastor of the First Baptist Church, and Gene Williams, CEO of Optima Chemical Group.

In parallel with the success of Douglas over the years, Georgia Tech has adapted to changed circumstances and grown as an institution. The Georgia Tech I was privileged to attend in the early 1960’s exists today only in limited elements of engineering and science fundamentals and historic architecture. The Georgia Tech of this century is known as one of the world’s great universities. The Institute’s accolades include:

- Named as one of the nation’s top ten public universities.
- Home to the one of the nation’s top five Colleges of Engineering, along with top ten rankings for public business schools and programs in applied mathematics and chemistry.
- Cited as number one in the nation among public universities for percentage of students who are National Merit Scholars.
- Home to three National Institutes of Health centers of excellence in nanomedicine.
• Home to national centers of excellence in photonics, electronic design, and solar technology.
• Home to new programs in energy, robotics, systems biology, and high performance computing.
• Ranked first in graduation rate among all public state universities.
• Cited among the top ten universities in the nation in generating patents.
• Generated over 50 new companies in the past five years.

There are others I could cite, but I would like to mention two that happened just this year. First, Georgia Tech’s outstanding women’s tennis team claimed the national championship. Second we offered the first program in University System of Georgia to provide full coverage of the cost of education at Tech for Georgia residents from financially disadvantaged families. Named the Georgia Tech Promise, this program is for students from families who make less than $30,000 a year. We are not only going to use this program to help students who are already bound for Georgia Tech or already at the Institute, but also we will use it to recruit students who might not otherwise believe they can afford us. You may have read about Duane Carver from Brunswick, an outstanding student who lived with a family that at times was in such financial straights they were homeless. Duane did not believe he could attend Georgia Tech until he was informed about the Georgia Tech Promise. As of today, he is headed for Tech this fall. We hope more students from South Georgia will take us up on the Georgia Tech Promise. We want to prove we are not only an outstanding state asset, but that we are doing our share to create access for those who could not otherwise afford it.

Considering all of the good things I have been able to say about Georgia Tech and Douglas, both can rightfully be proud of their accomplishments. However, in today’s world, yesterday’s success does not guarantee success in the future. And I would like to speak to this for the remainder of my time today.

Douglas and Georgia Tech were able to get here today by strategies I would suggest they share. Both of us learned that you have to scan the horizons for new developments, not hope to stay on a past course. Both of us learned that you have to eliminate petty competitions and move to a collaborative approach that encourages partnerships. Both of us understood that advanced communications were key, and that we live in a world where we compete, not just with regional entities, but with the world. Finally, both of us realized you have to define areas where you can stand out and be among the best. These ideas will continue to serve us well in the future, but even the best strategies must be modified as circumstances change or you risk getting left behind.
There are few places in the world, or in this country, that are not developing new approaches to capture an increased share of the world’s economy, particularly at the top end, the part that is driven by technology and is home to the top wages. I have been able to hear from dozens of these sources – from my service as a member of the National Governor’s Task Force on Innovation and the President’s Council of Science and Technology Advisors, to visits on behalf of Georgia Tech to countries around the world. Last year I participated in a special meeting of university and industry leaders in Moscow prior to the G-8 summit in Russia, where we heard about new approaches to innovation in each country. I can assure you that just about anywhere in the world people are working on new initiatives to prepare their economy for the future. We have to appreciate this and be ready for a new wave of competition.

We are truly fortunate to live in a country that is well endowed to compete based on its past investments. A good summary of our position is captured in the recently released Competitiveness Index of the U.S. Council on Competitiveness. The Index shows that the U.S. has the world’s largest economy and that it has grown more than any other nation over the past 20 years. High levels of productivity and an environment supportive of innovation have enabled us to compete successfully against low wage nations. We are a nation with a natural entrepreneurial spirit, supported by a base of laws and policies that generally are supportive of business and that protect intellectual property. Also, we have the world’s best research universities that help create the new ideas for the future of the economy.

But China, India, and Russia, among others, are now entering global economy with a force. Collectively, the emergence of these countries has effectively doubled global labor supply, and they are investing in their educational systems and research and development at a higher rate than the United States. China and India are rapidly adopting new technologies and by 2010, they will each have more Internet users than United States. U.S. companies are moving major operations to China and India, in part to be close to those large consumer markets, but also to access the growing high-tech talent pools. And those economies are reaching out and touching us. Seventy percent of the trade through the Port of Savannah comes via China, and medical images taken of you are just as likely to be analyzed in India as here at home.

The bottom line is that the United States must compete in a world where:

- We only produce one of every 4-5 new inventions.
- Wages, health care costs higher than competitors.
• The largest technology workforces and markets for technology are in Asia.

It is inevitable that in the future the proportion of the global economy that belongs to the United States will be smaller, but whether the actual size of our economic slice will shrink and our prosperity decrease is up to us.

We do know that the global economy will favor those who are creative and innovative – those who discover new knowledge and put knowledge to work in new ways, who solve problems, and who are nimble and flexible. The global economy will also favor those whose ties reach around the world, who embrace a diversity of cultures and ideas, and who actively improve their educational systems and optimize their research capabilities. Because we have been good at this in the past, we have an initial advantage. Now we have to be more deliberate about putting the right pieces together, and building on them to strengthen position as world’s leading innovation economy. And we have to address our weaknesses like expensive healthcare and litigation costs; venture capital, which today is concentrated in few locations; low expectations in math and science education; and unbalanced federal policies about funding of research and development.

In most instances, these are national policy issues, but we have to ask what we can do at the state and local level. The key is going to be innovation. Innovation is a hands-on process that happens in individual regions and communities. While positive national policies help, innovation is local and occurs at the state and regional level. According to the Council on Competitiveness, innovation = I^5 – the intersection of ideas, imagination, invention, insight, implementation. Those things can happen in any community – here in Douglas as well as up in Atlanta.

Quality education will be important, but it must incorporate new approaches at all levels, K-12 as well as our universities. At Georgia Tech, we know from asking that we cannot graduate engineers, business people, and scientists who look and act like they did yesterday. Our graduates have to be well rounded, creative, able to think outside of disciplinary boundaries, open to innovation, entrepreneurial, and informed about the world stage where competition will play out. Americans have to be educated to do more than in the past if they are to justify their higher salaries. Because of this, over one third of our students study abroad today, and Georgia Tech has bases in France, Singapore, Shanghai, and Ireland. Exploratory discussions are underway today with India. These locations offer platforms for our students and faculty to have in-depth experiences, and they provide a base for the state to develop useful linkages for economic development.
In addition to our global activities, over 40 percent of our undergraduate students participate in independent research and 3,000 per year participate in musical activities to sharpen their creative skills while enjoying downtime from science and math. When we add new majors today, they are often interdisciplinary – like biomedical engineering, computational biology, finance and business, computational media, and robotics.

When the renowned author Tom Friedman visited campus and heard of our new approaches, he included Georgia Tech in the latest expanded version of *The World is Flat*, saying: “What the Georgia Tech model recognizes is that the world is increasingly going to be operating off the flat world platform, with its tools for all kinds of horizontal collaboration.”

The signs say we are on the right track, as indicated by Tom Friedman and the fact that more employers are lining up to hire our graduates than any time in the past. Even so, we will not become complacent because as soon as you do, someone will pass you with a better idea.

I know that you here in Douglas are also thinking about the important issues that face this region if it is to be competitive in the future. I have confidence that you will succeed based on your willingness in the past to face and meet challenges. I can promise that Georgia Tech will continue to be a resource to you in providing an outstanding education for your children, sending talent to you when you need it, helping upgrade the math and science programs of your schools, and providing advice to your existing industry base. Working together we can compete and create a standard of living for our children and grandchildren that rivals that we have been blessed in having in our lifetimes.