

Inauguration of Reginald DesRoches

President, Rice University

October 22, 2022

Chairman of the Board Ladd, esteemed trustees, faculty, staff, students and alumni, good morning. As a former Rice University trustee, I was delighted to be asked to participate in this transition of leadership – one of the most important in the University’s history. Of course, any transition in leadership at an institution of Rice University’s stature can be said to be an important moment but the coincidence of this transition with the state of our national life today makes this occasion exceedingly more meaningful. By anointing Reginald DesRoches as its president, Rice is vaulted into a position of national leadership not simply of universities but also of a nation in need of leaders who possess the cultural competence to heal rather than divide. The nation is calling for leadership and this university has answered.

To be sure, Rice has an acknowledged tradition of excellent leadership. It could not have become the paragon of scholarship that it is today without the forward looking leadership provided by the Board of Trustees, visionary

presidents, capable administrators, a prize winning and innovative faculty and a governance structure that allows for a variety of inputs, including from students and alumni. Many marvel at or spurn university governance structures where so many feel empowered and are included as stakeholders. But such a structure makes sense when ones domain is knowledge creation and transfer, for how can we trust knowledge production that is closed to important insights and tests? If we are prepared to eschew the importance of so many participating in the effort to improve on what is known, we might as well confess our comfort with fallacies such as the notion that the earth is flat.

The input of knowledge over time from many perspectives delivers extraordinary benefits. That is why, as we anoint a new leader, we must be careful to build on the existing strength of the institution for that strength has been tested over time and, to borrow from materials science, we know that tensile testing is fundamental to the avoidance of failure. The greatest universities have learned this well; building on well-tested platforms is a good bit sounder than tearing everything down in deference to what is merely new and shiny. President Leebron, with whom I proudly served as a Rice Trustee, brought to this university a vision of expanded possibilities. Building upon what his predecessor had done, he led the university's advancement to an enviable

place in the diadem of higher education. As President of the American Association of Universities, he brought added recognition to the university. At the same time, his expanded vision of Rice's place in this community, the nation and the world acknowledged the University's civic responsibility in a rapidly changing social context. It is not easy for institutions to move gracefully beyond histories that pose challenges to a more modern vision and narrative, but Rice took that on and is creating a unique path to that reckoning.

For any president assuming the mantle of authority over a major international university, this should be a moment to acknowledge their entitlement to this leadership role in view of their stellar character and past accomplishments. In that regard, there is much to cite and laud in regards to the path that Reginald DesRoches has travelled to arrive at this ceremony today. A brilliant student at UC Berkeley, an Early Career award winner as a faculty member, a member of the National Academy of Engineering, the winner of many professional prizes and honors, and a breathtaking ascension through the academic and administrative ranks of Georgia Tech and Rice prove amply that he is well qualified to lead a major university. Not all universities being the same, what can we say about the unique match between his extraordinary profile and the needs of the university in this moment?

We must begin with the legacy of the university's founding. William Marsh Rice, who bequeathed much of his fortune to the establishment of this university, was in most respects a man of his times. On the one hand, he was impelled to dedicate a significant portion of his wealth to an extraordinary cause: the creation of an institute for the advancement of literature, science and art. In what must have been an extraordinary reach at the time given Houston's profile, he foresaw the need for access to a broad education. At the same time, the limitations of his background and socialization led him to specify that this largesse was destined for whites only. While we may speak today of the apparent dichotomy of perspectives embedded in these two acts, at the time of Marsh's decision, such decisions would hardly have seemed so to most. Marsh's act was as ordinary as the racism and discrimination that gripped the country in 1882. Few would have predicted that the admission requirement "for whites only" would hang so disparagingly over the fate of Rice for generations until the terms of the will could be overturned. Rice admitted its first black student in 1964, the year after I graduated from a Houston high school.

Given this historical context, what does it mean to have a person of President DesRoches' race and background assume responsibility to carry on the

legacy of William Marsh Rice's vision? It means everything. First, his appointment proves once again that, whatever the limitations of our vision in our time, future generations can never be permanently bound by them. Further, that President DesRoches is called to lead William Marsh Rice's university speaks powerfully to the strength of Marsh's idea that in knowledge lies wisdom and personal growth and the opportunity for society to advance. Both Houston and Rice University have advanced because of the knowledge afforded by thoughtful engagement with learning. Where would Houston be today without Rice and where would Rice be today without the decision to undo the racial terms imposed by its bequestor?

At the same time, let us be careful of a narrative that overstates the racial implications of today's ceremony for that is only part of the story. President DesRoches will not and must not be given a pass because of William Marsh Rice's error. He must be a president in full, judged not on the basis of his race and the difficulty he faces as part of this legacy, but on the basis of his ability to lead this community forward in a powerful, visionary and unifying manner. I can almost guarantee that few days will pass when he does not reflect upon the irony of a person of his background carrying on the Rice legacy. I know this because while serving as president of Brown University which was associated

with one of the most infamous slavers of the colonial era, I pondered incessantly how to lead in the context of that history. I discovered that keeping that history before me inspired me every day to be a better president. However, that history was never my principle guide in terms of what I needed to do as Brown's president.

President DesRoches, William Marsh Rice's story is not the end of the university's story and it is not the centerpiece of your story. By stepping into this role, you have the opportunity to create a new narrative for this amazing university. One that will resound through the ages.

Do not be overwhelmed by the fact that you have been entrusted with the future of a long enduring institution with tens of thousands of graduates who look to their institution as a beacon and bell weather for the rest of their days. With the intensity of that attention and the expectations of students, faculty, staff, civic leaders and so many others, this responsibility comes with a heavier burden than William Marsh Rice's legacy. I urge you not to concern yourself with the myriad opinions, criticisms, and plaudits that will come your way. Look first to who you are, what you owe yourself, and where you have come from. For it is enough, I think, to be chosen for such a role because of

your intellectual prowess, past success, national stature, and personal journey. Work hard at being yourself in the fullness of your knowledge and experience, following in the path that has led you to this day and relishing in the opportunity to do good for a community that you love and are committed to serve.

Reginald DesRoches is a man for this moment in history. Much will be written about him and William Marsh Rice and the meaning of his presidency. Imbued with the meaningfulness of his background in Haiti, formed in the context of the magnificent and inevitable march of justice, attentive to the opportunity to make a difference for others, he must define this moment in a way that suits him. I pray that all who honor this university will give him room to do that on his own terms.

Congratulations, Reginald. I wish you God Speed as you lead this great university to new heights.

Ruth J. Simmons