

Take A Risk!

Steve Poizner

Thank you very much, Dean Fenves, for your warm welcome and for that very kind introduction. It's great to be back home in Texas.

In my recent tenure as California's insurance commissioner, I gave LOTS of speeches up and down the state, and sometimes the introductions didn't go nearly as well. I remember speaking at a high school near my home in San Jose, and the student who introduced me had an incredibly bored look on her face. Her introduction of me was incredibly brief: "This is Mr. Poizner. He's been an engineering geek in Silicon Valley for twenty years, and now he's into insurance." Then she sat down. That was it.

When I got home that evening, I couldn't help but ask my seventeen-year-old daughter, Rebecca, "Why'd you introduce me that way?"

That's a true story I'm sorry to report, and I'm sure a bunch of you here today were about as excited as Rebecca when you heard that some guy who was "into insurance" was speaking today. But to put you at ease, I promise not to talk about actuarial science or fraudulent-claim statistics. Yet I do want to say a few words about the reason insurance exists—and that's because life is inherently risky.

And I'd like to suggest to you that risk is a very good thing.

Those of you who graduate from the Cockrell School of Engineering today richly deserve the accolades you'll receive. Let me be among the first to heartily

congratulate you on your very significant achievement. Your professors, colleagues, friends, and parents will also offer you lots of advice, and much of that advice will, no doubt, suggest great caution as you step into the wider world.

Because these are especially challenging times, people who care greatly about your future will likely urge you stay close to home, to work in the family business or to take a job with a proven and stable company. Friends will advise you to put off your dreams until your student loans are paid, or maybe to choose an entry-level job with Austin Water over your passion for green technologies. These kinds of admonitions are universally heartfelt, and they're meant to keep you safe from calamity, failure, and heartache.

But if you'll hear me out for just a few moments before you head out into the world, I'd like to suggest something starkly different. My message to each of you today is TAKE A RISK!

Do the very thing you're most PASSIONATE about at this moment in your life. Seize the opportunity that your accomplishment here offers you, and make your life a reflection of the very best you have to give.

Engineers are born risk-takers, after all. Whether in setting out long ago to build the Panama Canal or Hoover Dam—and brilliantly succeeding despite dire predictions of certain failure—or in thousands of more recent endeavors, engineers understand that without risk-taking, progress is impossible, and lives cannot be improved, or deaths prevented. Think for a moment of the enormous risks undertaken by CC Myers, Inc. in 2009 to retrofit the San Francisco Bay Bridge by inserting a new seismically safe 300-foot, 3,600-ton, double-deck section of the bridge

in only four and a half days and successfully seating the new section within half an inch of its intended target. And I can't help but marvel at the efforts of the management and employees of a small Pennsylvania company called Center Rock, who risked the company's reputation, and even its own survival, in rushing its innovative low-profile mining drill to Chile last fall, believing—correctly as it turned out—that its technology gave 33 trapped Chilean miners the best chance they had of seeing their families and loved ones again.

Perhaps no one on this stage knows better than your distinguished dean about the real challenges of risk-taking. At a time when we all remain very mindful of the devastation from Japan's recent earthquake, Dean Fenves's renowned work in developing sensors to test the strength and resiliency of buildings, bridges, and infrastructure in earthquake zones has focused on limiting risks and saving lives, and it's work that is more important than ever. And he took a personal risk of his own a few years ago when he gambled a prestigious teaching career at the University of California at Berkeley for a new opportunity in Texas, where he has successfully guided Cockrell into the very top tier of engineering schools in the nation.

I first came to Cockrell and the University of Texas after I'd graduated from a Houston high school. I loved it here and I thrived, despite the fact that living in Jester Dorm looked and felt more like prison than the university was eager to admit. But I did live there for three years, so it must not have been that bad. During my years at Cockrell, I was one of the last students—this is in 1974 mind you-- ever required to take the then-mandatory class on the use of the slide-rule—that's the truth, the SLIDE-RULE—and I occasionally STILL have nightmares about the huge risks

inherent in running the gigantic Texas flag out onto the football field at Memorial Stadium on windy Austin afternoons during my tenure as a member of the Alpha Phi Omega service fraternity.

When I graduated from the University of Texas, the safe thing would have been to go back to Houston, but I knew I wanted to MAKE THINGS—innovative things that improved people’s lives—and in 1978, a spot on the West Coast called Silicon Valley was a place where cutting-edge new companies were sprouting virtually every day. So I took the risky path, and set out for California.

I got an MBA at Stanford, founded a couple of companies, and after a few years I had what I thought was a really good idea. I wanted to develop life-saving technology that would put GPS receivers into cell phones, so that when people dialed 911 in an emergency, the police would know exactly where they were calling from. Up until that time, GPS signals could only be acquired out of doors, with a clear view of the sky, where it was relatively simple for devices to lock in on signals from GPS satellites 11,000 miles in earth orbit and racing at 25,000 miles an hour across the sky. But I believed we could take GPS inside by developing the technology to process the very weak GPS signals that are attenuated as they pass through building materials.

The development would be expensive—and very uncertain—and the first venture capitalists I approached could hardly contain their laughter. One fellow wouldn’t even hear me out because what I proposed was “LITERALLY IMPOSSIBLE,” he claimed. Another swore I was trying to sell him “WITCHCRAFT.”

The technology had obvious benefits for the military, too, but no one at the Department of Defense was willing to take me seriously either, until I challenged a Marine colonel working at the Pentagon to test my new technology against the military's then-current soldier-tracking capabilities. It was a "bet the company" risk—and the colonel wanted to prove that he did NOT need the help of a bunch of nerds from Silicon Valley. So, we met near Pier 39 in San Francisco for a showdown. The colonel outfitted a strapping, twenty-year-old Marine with existing equipment used by the military to track their soldiers. Its tracking system literally filled a huge backpack—with a large whip antenna sticking out of the top. Representing my company was an out-of-shape, forty-year old engineer named Howie. He simply stuck the small cell-phone equipped with my company's location chip in his shirt pocket. And off they went.

But I'd forgotten one small detail: San Francisco has LOTS of very steep hills. Inside an RV command post, the colonel and I watched two dots on a computer monitor loaded with Yahoo maps—the green dot that represented the Marine and a red dot that tracked Howie. Everything was fine for a while and the two dots slowly moved across the screen together. But then the red dot suddenly stopped as the green dot continued on, and I could see a grin begin to curl onto the colonel's face. "Looks like you've got a problem there," he said, but I couldn't imagine what it could be till Howie called me. He hadn't been able to keep up with the Marine, he confessed, so he'd stopped at a Starbuck's for a coffee. I couldn't believe it.

It was that Marine colonel's glowing final report about my technology that made all the difference, in the end. I found financial backers, and after only five years

in business, I sold my company to Qualcomm. Today, that laughable, impossible, so-called “witchcraft” technology is the industry standard. It can be found in more than SEVEN HUNDRED MILLION mobile phones around the world, and it has saved thousands of lives.

My next challenge was to apply what I learned in business to public service. I left the private sector and went to work in the White House as part of the counter-terrorism team in the National Security Council. Hard to believe, but my start date was September 4th, 2001—just one week before the September 11th attacks.

Shortly thereafter, and with the presumption that more attacks on Washington, DC would be coming, my boss, Richard Clarke, the chief counter-terrorism czar for three presidents, told me that because I hadn’t originally signed up for dangerous work, he would understand if I chose to be reassigned. But I told him point blank: “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good answer, Poizner,” he said.

In that case, he explained, I’d have to learn how to put on a bio-hazard body suit and gas-mask in under thirty seconds. The secret-service agent who trained me that day warned that I needed to keep the suit in a gym bag and carry it everywhere I went. So, I took the body suit and gas mask home that evening, and my wife and daughter were pretty horrified to see what my new work entailed. But in spite of the Secret Service’s admonition, I never took the bag home again. After all, there were three of us, and only the single safety suit.

I ultimately became responsible for helping plan emergency communications for the Salt Lake City Olympics and protecting the Internet and power grids from

potential cyber-attacks. During that time, I was constantly aware that millions of lives depended on the quality of the work we did. We faced huge risks, but those responsibilities entrusted to me were a kind of fuel that inspired me to do my best.

When I returned to California, I was struck by the state's many pressing challenges, and by how many new competitors Silicon Valley faced—not just from Texas and other states, but from around the world. Because of the Internet, there are now THREE HUNDRED MILLION highly educated, aggressive, businesspeople, scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs in India, China, and Russia ALONE who, for the first time in the history of our planet, can compete head-to-head with U.S. companies simply by plugging in—a reality that unleashes incredibly rapid innovation in engineering and the applied sciences as well as in the marketplace.

We cannot continue to effectively compete in the contemporary world unless we find ways to fundamentally improve the way we educate our children. That's a simple fact. I'm a proud product of Houston's public schools and looking at the state of public education in 2003, I decided I wanted to help turn things around. So, thirty-five years after I'd last been in a high school classroom and armed only with a sincere desire to help, I took another big risk.

Despite the fact that the personnel director at the Eastside Union High School District in urban east San Jose stiffly informed me that NOTHING I'd done in my entire life qualified me to work as a high-school educator, I finally convinced the principal of Mount Pleasant High School to let me teach for a year without pay.

Because teaching would be brand new for me, I really wanted to get off to a great start, but my first day in the classroom didn't go exactly as I had planned. I got

lots of advice from friends who were teachers, and at their strong suggestion, I marched into the classroom that first day ready to take charge and be as tough as I could be. I introduced myself to a roomful of bright faces, and explained that we were going to form a team and work very hard as we studied twelfth-grade American Government. Anyone who wasn't ready to join us, I proclaimed, should get up and leave.

EVERYONE in the room got up and left. I was in the wrong classroom.

I've never worked harder in my life than I did at Mount Pleasant High School, but I have also never felt as accomplished. That year in the classroom gave me a profound new respect for the many roles teachers play in the lives of their students. It's the setting where the brightest young minds in our nation are nurtured, and where more than a few lives are literally saved. I heartily recommend teaching to anyone who truly longs to make a difference.

Last year, I took my latest big risk and ran for governor of California. I ultimately didn't reach my goal, but I'm very proud that I gave the effort my all. And this is the essence of my message to you today. Look to the life experiences of others only to stimulate your own imagination. Use their experiences not as a template, but rather as an inspiration to help you find your own unique contributions. Look solely into your own heart for the answer to what paths you should follow in the years ahead. Whether in Silicon Valley, the White House, in the classroom or in public service, I've discovered that I really love trying to accomplish the so-called impossible, and I think you'll find exactly the same thing. Nothing makes you feel more alive

than setting out to do something that is difficult to achieve, then succeeding despite inevitable challenges and even failures along the way.

Cockrell class of 2011, I heartily congratulate you today on your great achievement, and I hope each of you is already planning your next great risk. Go out on a limb—that's where the fruit is! Climb all the mountains that call you, no matter what the reason. TAKE A RISK! Then, whether you fail or succeed, take another. We're Texans, after all, and the joy of risk-taking runs through our veins.

I wish you great risks. And I wish us all their great rewards. Thank you very much.