

[President's Address to Attendees at Banquet Thursday Night, May 29, 2003]

“RAISING THE BAR”

Thank you Mr. President, members of the board, fellow AFTE Members and guests.

A number of years ago, General Dwight D. Eisenhower was asked about what it takes to lead - and what characteristics are needed to band together a diverse group of individuals and unite them toward a common cause. In response, he took a piece of string and laid it out on a table. When he pulled at one end of the string, it followed directly behind his fingers. But when he pushed the end of the string, it piled up in front of him in a tangle of disorder. He summarized by saying, "just like string, people can be united into fighting for a common cause, but when pushed, will collapse upon themselves."

This illustration had great significance to me as I gathered my thoughts about the challenges facing our discipline and the role that I might play as a representative of our profession within my duties as incoming AFTE President.

I believe our profession is standing at a critical crossroads between past and future. The identification sciences, including firearm and toolmark identification, are facing renewed scrutiny by our judicial system. We are being asked to provide a higher level of demonstrative proof illustrating our observations and supporting our opinions. To meet that challenge, we are discovering that our past traditional responses to these questions are being met with increasing skepticism.

This having been said, I believe that all of us face two choices: 1) to cling to the past in hopes that these challenges will go away, or 2) to vigorously search for better answers to these questions as all truly scientific enterprises are bound to do, but at the expense of dealing with the uncomfortable feelings of change.

AFTE, as a body, acts as a voice for the profession, and must rise to meet this challenge. However, these issues have caused a significant amount of discord amongst our members in how to meet these challenges.

AFTE, like no other, should provide each one of us with a safe and thoughtful environment to discuss ideas, share experiences, and, yes, debate these issues. Sometimes those debates are fun. Sometimes those debates are enlightening. And, sometimes those debates are painful. Just like great scientists before us - Copernicus, Newton, Galileo, and Einstein, to name a few - we understand that the cause of advancing scientific endeavors must take priority over personalities, feelings, and friendships. The most spirited and sometimes agonizing debates, as well as the enthusiasm that they inspire, should remind each of us just how special this annual gathering of forensic scientists really is. Just as this night, assuming that it stops raining, will be washed away by the morning sun, so too will our

disagreements and conflicts become distant memories - leaving behind a healthier body of science that will continue on long after we are gone.

The work that I, as a firearm & toolmark examiner, put forth before the criminal justice system, affects in some way, each one of you. The work that each of you puts forth, in some way, affects me. We depend on each other. The idea that a scientist can operate within a vacuum works against the very basis of science itself. Since our individual work contributes to a combined historical record, it should be in our interest to invite others to peer review our product to insure the greatest value to the community we serve. It's not for us that the work is done. It is for others. That is why this business is called public service. Whether we are in private practice or not, it is still public service. We are here to serve.

All of us are well aware of the growing pressure being brought to bear on our science and its practitioners. Future examiners will be impacted by our decisions. The extent to which we can "raise the bar" will collectively define us in this new era of quality management and accreditation. As your president, I challenge us as a group of scientists, to ask ourselves a few questions:

#1 - Are we strong enough to tolerate change for the good of those who will follow us, or do we turn our backs on new, different and better ways of doing things?

#2 - Are we diligent enough to invest in the hard work necessary to embrace the advancements that could ultimately enhance our entire science, or should we be satisfied with entrenching ourselves in the past and maintaining the status quo?

#3 - Do we possess the leadership skills to go forth in command of our own scientific future, or do we wait for others to come along and dictate our next course of action to us?

All of us have individuals in our past that we fondly remember as having an unforgettable impact on our lives. Isn't it funny, though, that the ones we remember are those that challenged us and elevated even the expectations that we had for ourselves? Even when it was painful for us, we look back gratefully on those that made....us....better. We just don't give much thought to those in our past that were idle or remained content with the status quo. We don't remember the naysayers, or the cynics, or the procrastinators. Why should we? They don't deserve it. They didn't inspire us.

I assure you, as certain as I am standing here, each one of us in this room will be challenged over the next twelve months. New ideas will be brought forth. Recommendations for accreditation compliant measures will be introduced. And most importantly, we will be challenged to do our jobs even better than we've ever

done them before - not for us, but for the civil and criminal justice system and citizens that depend on our professionalism and expertise.

So what kind of people are we going to be in this pivotal time in the evolution of our profession? The future will get here soon enough, and there is nothing we can do to stop it. The question is, will future firearm & toolmark examiners thrive because of us, or in spite of us. The challenge before us is to continue defining our science, and influence for the better how it is practiced by those of us in the field as well as those who will follow. What an amazing opportunity we have. Why on earth would we want to waste it?

Let's not waste it. There are some things that we can do. For example, #1- Take time to read not only our AFTE Journal, but other relevant forensic literature, as well. #2- I encourage basic research, which tests our existing theories of identification as well as explores new ways to validate the scientific basis for the identification of striated and impressed toolmarks. Activities such as this, in a scientific enterprise, is called progress. Because of the increased scrutiny of all of our professional publications, it is imperative that we re-double our efforts and raise the bar in the areas of both pre-and post publication peer review. It is our responsibility as the relevant scientific community to assure that our Journal meets the most rigorous standards of professionalism. With this in mind, in our next Journal, you will find 2 draft proposals addressing our association's adoption of an official position statement setting the minimum standard for the documentation of tool mark identifications. These proposals will be accompanied by an explanation in the form of a letter to the membership from fellow distinguished member John Collins. John brings his proposals to us based on his experience from three significant vantage points—John is a practicing firearm and tool mark examiner, a Laboratory Director and an ASCLD/LAB inspector. Please review these proposals. I would strongly encourage you to use the AFTE web site as a forum for professional exchange of ideas, open discussion and debate concerning this significant issue. Listen to what is said. Share your ideas, if not on the website, with your peers and co-workers, about how we can move our science forward. My goal is for us to bring this issue to a vote at the business meeting during the training seminar in Vancouver.

Let's not cater to that which requires the least within us. Let's aspire to that which requires everything we have - and more.

In conclusion, I thank you for the honor of serving you as President. I'll work hard to be responsive, and have high expectations for all AFTE members, but especially those that hold office or serve on committees. But above all, I will do my best to appreciate the diversity among us, and unite us, toward common causes.

**Ann L. Davis
AFTE President 2003-2004**