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**Commencement Address, Elliott M. Estes, President, General
Motors Corporation, December 14, 1980**

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Remarks by

ELLIOTT M. ESTES

President

General Motors Corporation

Eastern Michigan University
Commencement

Ypsilanti, Michigan

December 14, 1980

Thanks very much. Let me add my congratulations and good wishes to you graduates -- and to your families as well. I know how much hard work and sacrifice this commencement represents for all of you, and I'm glad Dr. Porter and the University asked me to be a small part of it.

I'm also very pleased, of course, to receive an honorary degree from Eastern Michigan -- especially in the company of Dr. Morawetz, Mr. Starns and Dr. Evans. They all seem so much more deserving of it, but I'm sure they cannot appreciate it any more than I do.

Thinking about my own career -- and you graduates whose careers are just beginning -- I remembered what the famous western artist, Charles M. Russell, once said about himself. "Any man that can make a living doing what he likes is lucky, and I am that," Russell wrote. "Any time I cash in now, I win."

Well, I am lucky, too. After some 46 years with General Motors, I can honestly say I've never had a job I didn't like. I've never had an assignment in which I was bored -- at least, not for long. I'm sure most of you graduates will find as I did that there never is any shortage of challenges, there is always as much responsibility as you are willing to assume, and usually the rewards

are pretty satisfying too. This was certainly true in my case, and, as a result, the years seemed to fly by. When I think about it that way, my own college graduation doesn't seem that long ago.

But in another respect, my career seems to span more time than even the calendar indicates. When I graduated from the University of Cincinnati in 1940, I'd never heard about atomic energy, jet propulsion or antibiotics. Hybrid grains, human organ transplants and electronics and computers were just as foreign to me; I never imagined GM would be putting a computer on every gasoline car it builds, but that's exactly what we're doing today. And if someone had told me in 1940 that one day I'd see Americans walking on the moon, be able to watch live news events from around the globe from my own easy chair, or that science would develop microbes specifically bred to clean up oil spills and other industrial wastes, why, I'd probably have said they were nuts.

Yet, those advances, plus hundreds of others, not only occurred, but are now generally taken for granted. When I think of all the technical progress that has happened, it makes it seem like a very long time indeed since I was one of those being handed a diploma.

Now, I'm telling you this to try to make three points that I think are important.

First, mankind has never been able to foresee or predict with any accuracy what technological advances will occur. Back in 1940, for example, space travel was largely the province of science fiction and the comics -- and that was less than three decades before Neil Armstrong first stepped on the moon.

Second, even though we cannot predict them, technological advances will occur just the same, making life easier and longer, work shorter and more efficient, and opportunity greater and within the grasp of more people than ever before. Like flowers or children, however, technology grows better under some conditions than others.

That being the case, my third and most important point is this: the 1980s have the potential to be a decade of outstanding technological progress. A number of forces seem to be coming together to improve the climate for technology in this country in the next few years, and I'm optimistic that Americans are ready and eager to take advantage of that potential.

One reason I'm looking for a faster rate of technological growth in the '80s is that the U.S. space program is now paying back handsome dividends across a broad range of products and industries. In the auto industry, for example, a modeling technique, borrowed from the space program and expanded, now enables us to design either

components or entire vehicles with the computer and accurately predict how well they will perform in customer use before we build even the first prototypes. Using this technique, we can now predict and improve on the crashworthiness of new, lightweight designs, and without this computer science, we would not have been able to redesign our cars as quickly as we have.

The '80s will also see continued technical impetus because of energy -- the development of new supplies at home and around the world and the replacement of older, energy-consuming machinery with more efficient, new designs, reflecting the changes in world energy prices that occurred in the '70s and will continue in the '80s. The domestic auto industry's unprecedented capital spending in the early '80s for more efficient plants and products illustrates how changing energy economics will be spurring new technology in many industries.

At the same time, technological progress will continue to be needed throughout the 1980s for environmental protection. But with so much progress behind us, the share of capital investment needed for pollution control should decline in the '80s, leaving more money to be spent on new products, new production equipment, improved productivity and a U.S. industrial system better equipped to succeed against its worldwide competition.

That brings me to the most compelling reason why I believe the '80s can be the golden era of technology in this country -- I believe there has been a fundamental change in the mood of America recently. I'm certainly not a political analyst, but I see the results of the November 4 balloting as being far more basic than people just voting the outs in and the ins out. Fundamentally, I believe it was a referendum in which the American people decided to replace a philosophy of limits -- the idea that we now have to grow and progress slowly, if at all -- with a philosophy that says we haven't reached the end of our line yet -- that we can grow and make progress and compete; all we have to do is go out and try.

The key to this new mood in America, I believe, is the growing realization by people at all levels that the only way to provide more real opportunity is by increasing the size of our economic "pie." It's not enough to just slice it differently -- as well intentioned as that might be. And I think we -- as a people -- are learning, too, that it's not a good idea to distribute pie that we haven't earned yet. You pay a lot more for it in the end -- through inflation mainly, but also with the loss of incentive for people to do better, to be more productive.

You know, talking about a philosophy of limits, I'm firmly convinced that whether it's society, a corporation or an individual, the most serious obstacles we ever face are the ones we place in our

own way. Remember what I said about being able to assume additional responsibility. In my career, I never got in trouble for assuming too much -- just the opposite was true. Our self-imposed limits are the ones that usually hold us back the most, so I couldn't be more encouraged by evidence that we, collectively, are shaking off a negative outlook -- an obsession with the things that we perceive as impossible -- and beginning to adopt more of what engineers call a "can-do" attitude.

I hope I'm right in this analysis. The latter philosophy is certainly more consistent with our American tradition; basically, its the reason you and I are able to live as good lives as we do.

Of course, there are other indications of this shifting mood. You can even see it here on this campus and at colleges and universities around the country. For instance, 10 years ago, GM and other technically-oriented companies had an almost impossible job in recruiting the high-potential technical graduates that we needed. No doubt that was partly because of the unpopular Vietnam War. But today students across America are interested in engineering, the sciences and business, and our recruiters are again able to pick among the best graduates.

What happened 10 years ago has created a sort of vacuum of young technical talent in many companies, including GM. In one respect,

that's not a healthy situation. But in another, it creates almost unlimited opportunities for young people going into business and industry today, especially in the technical fields. Because there is this vacuum, they have the chance to move up faster than they ever would have before -- to be a full partner in what can be an unprecedented period of technical progress -- and with it, social and economic progress.

Because technology is so important to our further social and economic progress, I was pleased to learn that the University has recently formed a new College of Technology. I trust that through this decade, it will be in tune with the times, helping train people who can help this country meet its needs.

By using technology and our all-important human resources intelligently, I believe we can strike a reasonable balance between our competing priorities: We can improve our productivity and be more competitive in what is increasingly one large global marketplace; we thus can have more economic growth, creating more jobs -- enlarging the economic pie so that all Americans have the opportunity to live up to their full potential; we can have more economic growth and produce more energy in this country and still protect our fragile ecology; with a strengthening economy we can get back to paying as we go -- neither mortgaging our children's future nor ignoring those among us who genuinely need our help.

It will take technology, it will take intelligence and sensitivity in balancing all those goals, and it will take time. But it is a future worth working for -- a future that will again see this country and all its people benefitting -- a future that will stand as a model for the rest of the world -- a future we can take pride in.

Thank you again for inviting me to join you today and for this honorary degree. Good luck to you graduates. I must say I envy you. I can't think of a more exciting or potentially rewarding time to be starting new careers or becoming better equipped for careers that you've already begun. Make the most of those careers -- for yourselves and for the country.

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