

# 'Now you've got to buy your ticket'

**Editor's note:**

The following is a speech Houston Post columnist Lynn Ashby made at summer commencement ceremonies Aug. 13, 1977.

By LYNN ASHBY

President Miller, Dr. Williams, members of the A&M administration and faculty, parents, friends, fiancées, lovers, creditors, camp followers, sorrowful bartenders and disappointed next-of-kin, and, of course, you graduates, I thank you for having me here today. It shows a certain amount of taste on your part.

Besides, I always enjoy missionary work. I bring you greetings from civilization. (Here Ashby made a "Hook 'em Horns" sign).

Actually, I suppose I should show more reverence around here, for only at Texas A&M have scientists discovered how to turn a longhorn into a turkey. Coming here this morning, I wanted to wear my school's colors, but these days, when you see orange and white it means Anita Bryant at a Klan rally. Looking at this crowd, all dressed up in your graduation robes, no more can they say that black is beautiful.

But I didn't survive Highway 6 all the way from Houston to discuss your wardrobe, however drab it may be. No, I came here today to collect, because you owe me some money, and I want it back. As a matter of fact, I have personally been delegated by the people of Texas to come here today and collect their I.O.U.s.

What I'm talking about, in case you haven't guessed, it that you have been riding the gravy train long enough, and now you've got to buy your ticket. For all these years you have been attending a tax supported institution of higher learning, so to speak. You have been eating in the public trough, and the public is now presenting the tab.

Take out your pencils and paper and get this down, because you have a right to know just how much it's going to be. You also have the right to remain silent and the right to call a lawyer.

**HERE AT A&M YOU ARE** paying 13.2 percent of the cost of your education, at the University of Texas-Austin it's 12.6 percent and at the University of Houston — 15.6 percent. I'm not talking about how much you spend; I'm not talking about the cost of food and lodging, which you would have anywhere you lived. I'm not talking about your gasoline bills, and what you dropped at the Dixie Chicken, nor am I referring to the amount of money your parents have been sending you all this time. I am strictly speaking about the cost of your education. For about every one dollar you or your parents are paying to A&M, the taxpayers of Texas are paying another eight. You are paying, on the average, \$334 — the state kicks in another \$2,527. This fiscal year, the good people of Texas are forking over about \$1.2 billion for public higher education, and that's you. Texas may be a backwater in some areas — such as legislators — but when it comes to spending money on you, we're generous to a fault. Over the past decade, Texas has ranked third of the 50 states in the amount of funds we've spent on higher education. Over the past two years, we've increased our spending faster than any state but one — Alaska. I got back from Alaska on Wednesday. There are a lot of Teasips up there — it's known as the ice of Texas. A lot of our money spent on higher education comes right here, to Texas A&M. Over the last two years, funding for this school has

gone up 64 percent — that's 64 percent in two years.

I realize that some of you philosophy majors are having trouble keeping up with me, so after it's over, ask a math major what I'm talking about. Maybe he will tell you that the total investment which Texas has in its physical plant right

you. Unlike the federal government, there is no paper mill cranking out dollars to make up for the deficit. All of this money came from Texans — the people you live with and live off of.

When you leave here today to go home to Pampa or Houston or Harlingen or Waco, along the way you'll see Texans plowing fields and wiping windshields and shining shoes. You be nice to them, because they put you right here, right now.

Do we have accounting majors here? Hold up your clean hands. No, your clean hands. Oh, those were your clean hands. OK, to get you through four years of Texas A&M cost \$7,950.83 each. Any biology majors? It cost \$8,596.98. Chemical engineers are expensive — \$10,828. Any journalists? You come cheap, and you always will. A mere \$7,851.76. Again, remember that you paid about one-eighth of this. I paid the rest.

## Opinion

here at A&M is now \$264 million, wholesale. You've been playing with more than \$56 million worth of equipment, and I won't even go into the cost of your basketball team.

Part of this money goes to pay your professors. You may have noticed all the El Dorados parked in the faculty parking lot. Here at A&M, they pay the professors from petty cash; the average salary is about \$15,500.

Let's not get bogged down in dollars; let's just remember that the State of Texas operates on a pay-as-you-go basis by law. Every dollar going out has to be matched by a dollar coming in. So when I tell you that we now have three billion dollars invested in just the physical plants of our state's public colleges and universities — three billion — please remember that virtually every single one of those dollars came from the sweaty backs of the people of this state. They earned that money, then they gave it to

**WE HAVE A FEW DOCTORAL CANDIDATES HERE.** Boy, did you run up a tab. Above and beyond the cost of getting your bachelor's degrees, it cost an extra 29 grand to get a Ph.D. in educational administration. If you got your doctorate in English, \$33,000 extra just so you can tell us if this money was loaned or lent to you. And, if you got your doctorate in chemistry or oceanography, above and beyond the cost of getting your bachelor's degree, it cost an extra \$55,264.04.

There are no veterinarians graduating here today and just as well. To get a vet from freshman to full-fledged veterinarian, it costs more than \$119,000. Most of them make that back by Halloween.

All right, now you know the bill you've run up around here. You may have thought we weren't keeping tabs, but we were. We know who you are. We want our money back, because I now will give you the first and foremost rule of the outside world: there is no free lunch. So, now, the waiter will present you with the check. Actually, I had planned on having the Ross Volunteers pass among you with fixed bayonets and collect, but there are probably a few out there who don't have the funds right now, and I know better than to take your checks.

Indeed, there may be some chemical engineering Ph.D. who doesn't have the 11 grand on him for his bachelor's degree, to say nothing of the \$55,000 we spent on him for his doctorate. So, I've got a better idea. If you can't pay it, you can work it out. One way or another, we'll get it.

Work it out. It's not such a new idea. If you were graduating today from West Point or Annapolis, Uncle Sam would be collecting his pound of flesh for your degree. You'd be spending several years in uniform. You ROTC people know about that.

France requires at least one year of service from its young men, in the military or in some Peace Corps-like pursuit. Some of them go to Louisiana to teach French to Cajuns; I think they get combat pay. The Soviet Union demands that its highly educated citizens repay the state for their education before immigrating to other lands. And the

Mormons as — and get — two years' service from their young people.

**SO, AS YOU CAN SEE,** my idea of you working off your debt is no revolutionary, starry-eyed plan. It is done all over the place, but not in Texas. Until now.

At this point you are probably saying to yourself, "This is ridiculous. I've always been told that I should be educated. I've been told that a full education was my right. It's owed to me." Yes, we told you that. But we lied. You have no right to the education you now have. You have simply been lucky enough to draw the white bean. A lot of people in this state who cannot afford to send their own children to A&M have sent you instead.

So, as I said, you should pay them back. You civil engineers can go to work for the Department of Highways and Public Transportation putting bumps in our freeways, or whatever it is you do. You teachers can go teach — for free. Journalists can go to work as information flacks in state agencies. Now, there is a problem with all you philosophy and English majors. It bothered me for awhile, just where the public needed your talents. Then, driving up here from Houston, it hit me. There's a lot of litter along the highways....

The State of Texas needs physicians. Almost one out of every 10 counties in Texas has no doctors. The people of this state are spending on the average, for each medical student each year, \$23,554. That's per student, per year. Incidentally, don't think that by going to a private medical school your debt to Texas will be less — state aid to Baylor College of Medicine boils down to \$33,435 per student per year. State aid to both the Baylor and the UT dental schools is more than \$19,000 a year for each student. I don't think it's asking too much of our future doctors and dentists to put down their nine irons long enough to help repay the gigantic cost of their education — money spent on them, by us.

As you can see, there are just all sorts of jobs around for you to do, to work off your debt. In Texas we are appropriating an average of \$75.07 from every man, woman and child in this state, to run our higher education program this year. Again, this isn't just funny money; it is labor money, and a person has to work just as hard to earn a dollar for your education as he does to make a dollar for food to put on his table. There is no free lunch.

Each of you has some TALENT, probably the result of what you learned right here at A&M, which can be used briefly for the benefit of the people who paid your way through school — the people of Texas, people you never saw and never will see, farmers in Plainview, pharmacists in Pharr, school teachers in St. Augustine, even journalists in Houston. Rationalize it any way you want. You can well say that you will return this money and a lot more over the years through your state taxes. I doubt it. I doubt that the small Texas taxes you will pay will cover the cost of the roads you use, the salaries of the teachers who teach your children the game warden

and highway patrolmen and pollution experts run up here. It. Some of you already have plane ticket out of state. You never set foot in Texas again, never set foot in Texas again, some of you will go banking, some of you will become state lotteries. Frankly, I recommend first two over the latter. You are you won't repay the debt you have run up here, and over the past years. And, are, you won't offer your services to the state for free. I suspect leave here today I will still be along the highways. You won't take care of the sick and the and you won't repay what has been loaned, not by working.

OK, I've got one other idea just full of ideas to get you back. I want you to go out and job and make lots of money. I want you to give some of it to A&M; I want you to stack it on Dr. Williams' desk. I want to build new classrooms and buy books and endow chairs for professors. Not nickels and dimes, accept nothing less than \$10,000.... a year, each.

This way, others can come to future years to learn what a loo caneek caneek is. Con for: "I would have gone to U if they found out my parents married."

When they call your name a few minutes, and you come this minute, I'll be watching remembering who you are. I want my money back, and I want it in cash — coins, stocks, small unmarked bills from Duval County. I'll even Duval County. Why should I differ?

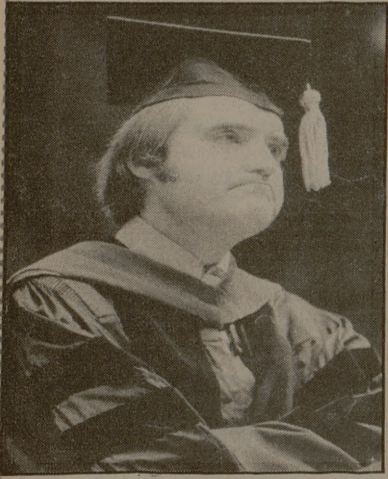
So just remember your debt to this school. I'm not talking some obscure, philosophical society. You philosophy majors discuss that while you pick up cans along Interstate Highway No. I'm talking about your debt to Texas A&M. Without school, today you'd be just an unemployed graduate.

I congratulate you on getting far. I realize it wasn't easy — six years. Your joy today exceeded only by that of your and the taxpayers of Texas.

**I AM NOT GOING TO YOU** to go onward and upward know the direction. I am not to tell you that the world there eagerly awaiting you, we've gotten along just fine you. I am going to tell you there's room at the top and lonely up here.

No doubt today your most emotions can be expressed in words: "I'm out!" I've got to you; you're not out, you're in. Now you can help send other men and women to A&M school, this state, was not takers. It was built by green have been offered a good pensive education. What with it is up to you. Thus have been takers, now it's turn.

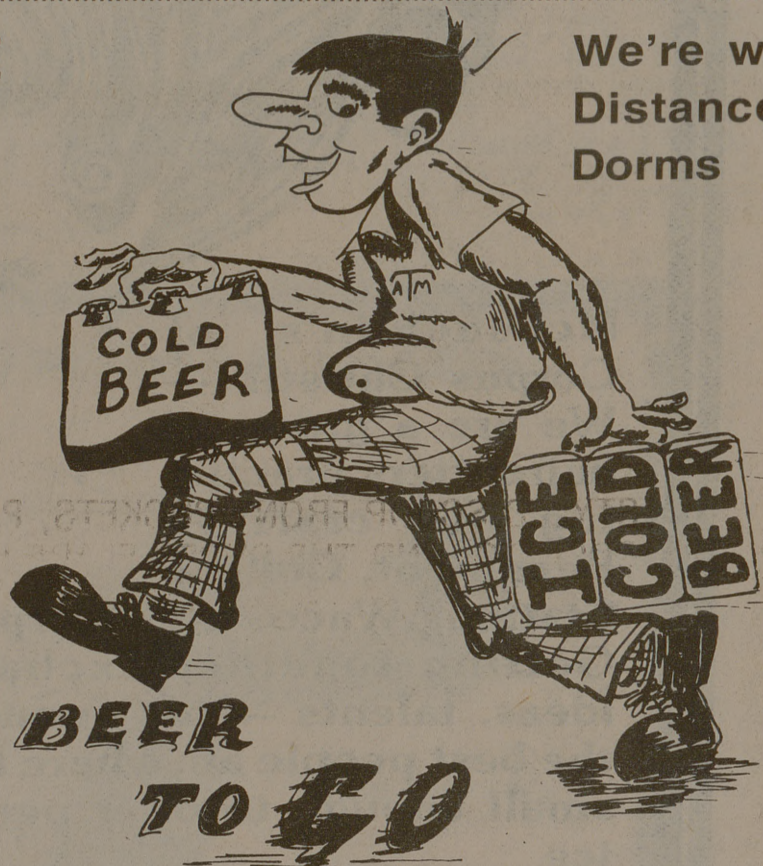
Come on up here now on your diplomas. You worked get this far. It's time to call and have a good time. You good. There may be no free but this is the dessert.



Lynn Ashby

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