We were then: annihilation. The difference is that this potential annihilation is largely one of our own making. Instead of going out with a flash and a mushroom cloud, we’re now facing down a more prolonged but no less serious end to our way of life, one of crazy weather patterns, rising oceans, resource wars, terrorism, and, just for old time’s sake, a mule or two. (TV’s Charlie Gibson set up one of his presidential debate questions by saying, “The best nuclear experts in the world say there’s a 30 percent chance in the next 10 years [of a nuclear attack on an American city].” Some estimates are higher: Graham Allison at Harvard says it’s over 50 percent.) Did anybody else hear that? 

There’s a moral obligation for every person of mental means to bend her energies toward solving the problems of our age. To use the University, or abuse the tenure system, as a place to camp out is indefensible. The University can count on its prestige, or, all along with all of its peers, it can be a life raft that will carry us to a sustainable future. It’s time for the University, all universities, to unleash the intellectual firepower of academia on the planet’s problems like never before. If moral obligation isn’t enough, then they should do it out of self preservation.

The Commission of 125 wrote, in Recreation 14 of its report: “The University should serve Texas by marshaling its expertise, programs, and people to address major issues confronting society at large. The culture of the institution should convey to students, as well as to faculty and staff members, that a commitment to service is intrinsic to a University of Texas education.”

In 1953, Chancellor Logan Wilson put it this way: “We want this University to be truly of the first class, not for the sake of mere emulation or rivalry, but for more basic reasons. The potentialities of a great university as an instrument for the common good are almost limitless.”

The University has always served a valuable vocational function, training students to make a living in a variety of fields. But more and more press releases that ping into my in-box are announcing new centers that are interdisciplinary and cooperative, like the new Strauss Center for International Security and Law, which boasts faculty participants from numerous departments across campus. Its promotional literature says, “The Center transcends traditional academic boundaries and respectful debate, and prepares faculty and students to become leaders in a complex global environment.”

I’m also reminded of the creation of the Section of Integrative Biology not so long ago. And I think of Rick Cherwitz in the College of Communication, who is working to increase the connection between the university and the real world with its Intellectual Entrepreneurship program. It’s clear that as an institution, we’re moving in the right direction. The only question now is whether we and others like us are moving fast enough.

The ultimate sin would be to have the intellectual tools to solve these problems and yet content ourselves with tending the academic stovepipes; promotes broad and respectful discussion, training students to make a living in a variety of fields. But more and more press releases that ping into my in-box are announcing new centers that are interdisciplinary and cooperative, like the new Strauss Center for International Security and Law, which boasts faculty participants from numerous departments across campus. Its promotional literature says, “The Center transcends traditional academic boundaries and respectful debate, and prepares faculty and students to become leaders in a complex global environment.”

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