

Let's work together to build a stronger South Carolina

By Richard W. Riley

former governor and U.S. secretary of education

NOTE: Secretary Riley gave the following speech Tuesday at the annual Wilkins Leadership Awards Dinner in Columbia by the [Riley Institute at Furman University](#). We've removed some introductory material, but the rest of the prepared remarks are offered in full.

JAN. 14, 2014 -- As most of you know, today is the beginning of the legislative season in South Carolina . . . the first day that members of the Legislature get together to carry out the work that our citizens have put their trust in them to do.



Riley

That work is extremely important. It affects all of us South Carolinians. Most importantly, the Legislature's work affects our children . . . and they are our future. I have always loved the fast-moving pace of this time of year. I looked forward to it when I was in the Statehouse . . . and I know my good friend, [former House Speaker and Ambassador] David Wilkins, did, too.

It is a time of action to tackle the crucial issues that our state and its people face. And it is a time for working together to move our state forward in this challenging 21st Century.

I doubt there is a person in this room who doesn't recognize how different our world is now, compared to just 20 or so years ago.

Look at how the world has changed

Since 1990, we have seen the Berlin Wall come down, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of Apartheid in South Africa, the development of the European Union . . . as well as a technology explosion that has brought us the world-wide internet, cell phones, GPS and social media, to name just a few amazing developments.

At the same time, we have suffered the huge loss of the textile industry . . . and we have witnessed the economic emergence of the so-called BRIC countries – BRIC being the acronym for Brazil, Russia, India and China. Seen as third-world countries just a dozen years ago, the BRICs now are major economic powers that compete with us and all around the world.

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-- Dick Riley

China is playing to win

China, in particular, has risen rapidly as a world economic, as well as military, power. Its business, manufacturing and construction reaches around the globe. The

Chinese currently are the largest investors in Asia and Africa, buying up farmlands and oil fields.

In the past three years, the Chinese have built the world's fastest train – it hits speeds up to 240 miles per hour – and the world's largest rail network. The work on these projects – most of it now done entirely by Chinese engineers – is impressive.

Even more noteworthy, in my view, is that, in 2010, China graduated more than 10,000 Ph.D. engineers. At the same time, American universities graduated *fewer than* 8,000 Ph.D. engineers – *two-thirds* of whom were foreign nationals. And some of those are Chinese, who will return home. As a result, the quality of Chinese engineering graduates is now seen by many as equal to – or approaching – that of the U. S.

It is clear that China is HUGE. It contains almost 20 percent of the world's population – compared to only 4-1/2 percent in the United States. And, while expanding their industrial and military complex, they have come to recognize the importance of investing heavily in their human capital.

In just the last year, the Chinese announced their plan to invest the equivalent of 250 billion dollars – that's 250 billion with a capital "B" – in the education pipeline . . . from early childhood through graduate education. I recognize, as you do, that the Chinese lag far behind us when it comes to individual rights, safety, the environment and the whole host of quality-of-life issues. But when it comes to economic expansion and competition, the Chinese are in it to win!

We've got to be smarter and more effective

So, the context and circumstances of South Carolina's – and America's – future economic development and its trajectory are clear. We have no choice but to compete – and we must do it efficiently, intelligently and effectively.

We no longer are competing for jobs, business, talent, and capital *just* with our other states. We now must compete with the whole world. And America no longer has the advantage. The new technologies I mentioned earlier have leveled the playing field . . . created "a flat Earth," as author Tom Friedman puts it.



Yet, South Carolina has some serious constraints.

We are a *small* state and we are a poor state economically, relative to most others in America. One out of five of our people live in poverty – *real* poverty, by any standard – and about half of our public school students live in *abject* poverty.

The recession that plagued our country hit South Carolina hard. A low tax base, high poverty and unemployment, an inadequate infrastructure, and a contentious political climate are real impediments at any time – but especially in this globally-competitive world in which we now live.

Some people demonstrate extraordinary leadership in trying to combat those challenges, and it is those individuals to whom the Riley Institute pays tribute with the Wilkins Leadership Awards. For the last nine years, we have celebrated men and women who have exhibited exemplary leadership in the Legislature. More recently, we also have recognized remarkable civic leaders.

Tonight we are here to honor two very special people – the distinguished Senator Paul Campbell and the late Steve Morrison – my dear friend and law colleague, whose professional credo was "those who serve the law . . . must also serve the poor." All of the Wilkins Leadership awardees have worked hard and selflessly for the public good, for our state, and for all of our people.

From this podium, I look out at our state's political, business, and community leaders. I do so with pride and with the certain understanding that all of us here want what is best for our state and all of our people. And, all of us know in our hearts that we are at a juncture in our state's history where "business as usual" simply is *not* an option.

We are too smart to spend our time on petty disputes or on turf battles. We are better people than that. This is the time in our history for us to work intelligently, collaboratively, and with hard-nosed focus to move our state forward for all of our people. We must begin to do this right here and right now!

Let's put our minds, talents to work to "smell the future"

I firmly believe that we all are honorable people and that, by putting our collective minds and talents to work, we can accomplish anything. Working together is the *only* way we can move South Carolina forward, especially in this globally-competitive world. Whether we are from the Midlands, the Coast, the Pee Dee, the Lowcountry or the Upstate, we *all* are in this together.

We know beyond any doubt that education and economic development are linked. We don't need our friends in China or other parts of the world to tell us that. We know that the wise investments we make in the human and physical infrastructure of our state pay off, both in the short and long run.

It is time to use our great colleges and universities, our business leaders, and our elected public servants at all levels – city, county, state, and federal – to move us forward on education, health, and economic development. This would be a "Grand Coalition" to focus on our beloved state of South Carolina and serve all of our people.

We really don't have a choice, do we? South Carolina must take far-sighted, collaborative, progressive action . . . or be relegated to the backwaters of the national and international economy.

When I was governor, we had a real shot at getting a large Sony plant here in the Midlands. One of the Morita brothers, the owners of Sony, met with me at the Governor's Mansion and we talked late into the night. Mr. Morita told me of the

Japanese belief that, to be truly successful – as a corporate executive, as a governor or legislator, or as a leader of any kind – to be truly successful, you had to be able to "smell the future."

That is the message I share with you this evening. Let's all of us "smell the future" together . . . and then prepare for it together.

Riley served as governor of South Carolina from 1979 to 1987 and as U.S. secretary of education from 1993 to 2001.