

An Endangered Species in Desperate Need
of a New Generation of Leadership

Morehouse College Commencement Address

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President Franklin, Morehouse College Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, class of 2008, and ladies and gentlemen, as an alumnus, it is both a tremendous honor and an enormous responsibility to be with you here today. Let me begin by congratulating the Morehouse Board of Trustees for their selection of Bob Franklin as the 10th president of Morehouse College. Bob is the right man for the right time. He has a keen vision for the direction of the college and the energy and determination to implement it. He is equally at ease with the wealthy and with those whose wealth is not measured by their bank accounts. He is a scholar's scholar and a preacher's preacher. And, he has honored me more than I can ever express by asking that I deliver the

commencement address for his first graduation ceremony as president of Morehouse College.

I also want to take this opportunity to publicly thank several current and past Morehouse faculty: Anne Watts, Richard Winstead, Willis Sheftal and James Hefner. They instilled in me a life-long love of learning and a commitment to serve others. They embody all that is special and wonderful about Morehouse College. Lastly, I want to thank my wife, Dr. Jacqueline Copeland-Carson, whose beauty is only exceeded by the generosity of her heart and the sharpness of her intellect.

Graduates to be, I know that I am the last stop between you and the degree that you have worked so long and so hard to earn. I won't take too long but I do have a few things to say. Today is a day of transition. It is a time when you take stock of where you have been and make plans about where you are going.

As you reflect on your past, please find at least one moment to thank the mothers and fathers, the grandmothers and grandfathers, the aunts and uncles, the brothers and sisters, as well

as the friends and neighbors for their sacrifices, large and small, seen and unseen on your behalf. As you continue to reach for the sky, remember that it was their prayers, their encouragement and their financial assistance that helped to make this day possible.

Like graduating classes before you, you come from all parts of the country, majored in different disciplines, worship different faiths, some of you are gay and not all of you are African American. In a few moments, none of these differences are going to matter anymore. In a few moments, you will receive your degree, turn your tassels from one side to the other and join a fraternity of Morehouse men who over the decades have accepted both the responsibility and the burden that their individual success was not a substitute for the collective success of African American people.

As Dr. Benjamin Mays once said: “It will not be sufficient for Morehouse College, for any college, for that matter to produce clever graduates, men fluent in speech and able to argue their way through; but rather honest men, men who can be trusted in public

and private – who are sensitive to the wrongs, the sufferings, and the injustices of society and who are willing to accept responsibility for correcting the ills.”

So what are the ills of today that will require the leadership of your generation? Unfortunately, the list is long and growing: global warming, international food shortages, human trafficking, and international economic exploitation, among others. Each of these issues will require the energy and intellect of honest men and women everywhere. However, today we are at Morehouse College, one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the nation. We are at a school that is dedicated to training leaders for our world that is the school of choice for African American men.

We are therefore at the ideal place to talk about the challenges facing the African American community that are threatening our very survival. We need to draw attention to the nearly incomprehensible juxtaposition of the 520 African American male college graduates seated in front of me today—ready to lead in every area of human endeavor—and how distant

the fulfillment of the dream has become for a growing majority of our people.

Never before has the phrase, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” had so much meaning. Yes, more African Americans are doing better than ever before and, simultaneously, more African Americans are doing far worse than ever before. The cup which was half-full and half-empty has sprung a leak and in the process we have become an endangered species in desperate need of a new generation of leadership.

Forty-one years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, our most famous alumnus, observed: “Of the good things in life, the Negro has approximately one half those of whites. Of the bad things of life, he has twice those of whites.”

Sadly, from birth to death, Dr. King’s theorem still remains true.

- African American infants remain twice as likely as white infants to die before their first birthday.

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- Today, half—that's right—50 percent of all African American boys drop out of high school and 42 percent of all black boys have failed an entire grade at least once. In Detroit, the male high school drop-out rate is 65 percent.

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- The poverty rate of African Americans is 24 percent compared to 8 percent for white Americans. The median household income of African Americans is 61 percent of that of white Americans, roughly \$32,000 compared to \$51,000.

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- AIDS accounts for one in three deaths among black men 25-44 years of age. AIDS is the leading cause of death of black women. And, black children have the highest incidence of AIDS compared to any other children.

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- African Americans are 13 percent of the population and yet black men are 49 percent of this nation's murder victims and 41 percent of the country's prison population.

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The litany of statistics detailing current racial disparities by health, employment, income and wealth goes on and on and on. What is even more dispiriting is the deafening silence of national indifference.

The indisputable facts of our endangerment have sparked no national debate, no efforts to establish federal or state commissions and no suggestion that any significant amount of public resources will be expended to address the dire circumstances of African Americans. White America seems perfectly content to say that it's not their problem and the part of Black America that is not affected seems perfectly content to say it's not their problem either. And as for those Americans of Latino and Asian descent, they say it hasn't been their problem and it's not their problem now.

The reality is that any effort to save us is going to have to start with us. No one is going to save us but honest men of good will — Morehouse men—who are willing to take responsibility for solving the social ills confronting our people. Today, our decades old

challenges have new roots that will require honest, difficult, conversations along with new strategies and a new commitment.

Yes, and without question, racism remains alive and well and, unfortunately, many of you will soon have the opportunity to experience it first-hand. The fact that research studies continue to document that white ex-offenders are more likely to be hired than black high school graduates, that black renters with identical socio-economic profiles to white renters are less likely to get the apartment, that those with black sounding names are less likely to get job interviews or the job, and continuing disparate sentencing between black and white Americans for the same offenses, among other examples, show that racism continues to adversely impact our quality of life and stain the character of our country.

However, the starting point for solutions to the high school drop-out rates in cities where the local political and school board leadership is largely African American is about hope and setting high expectations and not historical racism. The murder of African American men—still by far at the hands of other African American

men—is about self-hate and machismo and not because of racism. The sale of crack cocaine and meth by African American gangs that is destroying the fabric of our families and communities is about income and economics and not racism. And, the AIDS epidemic that is spreading unchecked through our community is about the failure to practice safe sex and not racism.

To address these issues will require painful public conversations and hard work about how some members of our community have become the instruments of our own destruction. And, as if the heated debate surrounding Bill Cosby's comments on what's ailing our community doesn't tell you how difficult having these discussions will be, there are three meta-trends underway that will make our work even more difficult.

The first meta-trend is that we live in a global society. The internet has made it possible for almost everyone, living anywhere, to sell anything, buy anything, learn about anything and have an opinion on everything. When half of African American boys are unable to graduate from high school, it is a certainty that they will

be unable to intellectually compete in the global marketplace and that their physical labor will be unnecessary as there are others who are willing to engage in backbreaking labor for pennies a day—and without the attitude. In such a world, these children—our children—will increasingly find themselves relegated to fighting for scraps and filling jails as the economic development strategy for America's rural communities. We are an endangered species in desperate need of your leadership.

The second meta-trend is that we are bearing witness to the end of America's reign as the dominant superpower. The lesson of history is that every superpower comes to an end. It happened to the Egyptians. It happened to the Persians. It happened to the Greeks. It happened to the Romans. It happened to the Ottomans. It happened to the French. It happened to the British. And, we are starting to see it happen to America.

Please do not misunderstand my words. I love this country and am thankful everyday to have been born in America. I am even wearing a flag lapel pin underneath my robe for those of you

who may question my patriotism on the inside if you don't see a \$1.39 pin on the outside. However, notwithstanding my loyalty, history tells us that no country remains on top forever. The historical pattern before the downfall is for the dominant power to overextend its military in foreign adventures while draining its financial resources at home. Does any of this sound familiar? The current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have lasted longer than World War II, are responsible for the loss of over 4,000 American lives and to date have cost the country \$1.6 trillion and there is no end in sight.

The US has a budget deficit of \$9.4 trillion and growing. Whether you support or oppose the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there can be no question that the country will not have the necessary resources to spend on improving public education, providing universal healthcare, repairing failing bridges and roads or rebuilding after catastrophic natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. As China and India begin to establish themselves as the superpowers of the future and exert their influence on the world's

political, cultural and economic spheres, America, even if she could find the willpower, will not have the means to fulfill any debt that some may believe the country still owes to African Americans.

The third, and least understood, meta-trend occurred on January 3rd of this year and its significance is still unfolding. On that day, Senator Barack Obama won the Iowa democratic caucuses. It matters not whether Senator Obama is successful in becoming President of the United States. His individual success in Iowa, 26 other states and the District of Columbia will be seen by the country as indisputable proof of the collective equality of African Americans. The promissory note that Dr. King once argued was due to African Americans and stamped insufficient funds now will be viewed by the American people as cashed and paid in full.

I firmly believe that history will mark Senator Obama's campaign as the turning point when white America's sense of obligation to African Americans ended. It will be remembered as

the day when white America absolved itself of having any further emotional guilt or financial responsibility for either the sins of the past or the need for any further race-specific reparations.

We have been building up to this point over the years; for example, the legislation in my home state of California that bars the consideration of race or ethnicity in hiring decisions or academic admissions. We are an endangered species under assault from within and from the outside in desperate need of your leadership.

And what leadership am I expecting from each of you? I am asking that each of you live up to and honor the highest traditions and expectations of being a Morehouse man. I am expecting that you reach a hand back while you continue to climb ever higher. I am asking that you commit yourselves to finding ways to give some of your time and some of your money to efforts that help our people. I am convinced that the only people that young black boys will listen to are black men who take the time to become role models and mentors. I believe that like it or not, agree with it or

not, to move our community forward will require us to accept that the successful civil rights agenda that was focused almost exclusively on the rights of black people must evolve to become an education and economic agenda for all people.

I believe that you will have to build new coalitions across racial lines that focus on income and class strategies rather than race or ethnic-only specific strategies. I believe that it will take people with the right minds and right hearts with the ability to write big checks to finance the campaigns of like-minded political candidates and effective nonprofit organizations.

The challenge to you is simple. Our survival as people is in question. The successful arguments and strategies that have brought us thus far along the way are inadequate to the trials and tribulations before us. As it has been throughout time at moments of great transformation, it is up to those who are younger to question the wisdom and tenants of our elders and lead us in new directions. So it was with Booker T. Washington, so it was W.E.B.

Du Bois, so it was with Malcolm X, so it was with Martin King and so it must be with you.

You have the skills. You have the leadership training. And, I believe that the spirit and ideals of Morehouse College have been instilled in all of you to make our world and the black community a better place. It will require you to gain prominence in your chosen field, speak out loudly against injustices as you journey to the top and generously contribute your income and wealth to nonprofit organizations, political campaigns and your alma mater. Finally, you will need to make a commitment to devote part of your most precious commodity – your time—to reach a hand back to help lift up the young boys with no responsible fathers in their lives and no reason to hope that the life you have achieved can be theirs.

Today is a day of transition. As you light your own candle, use your flame to light those candles that are still in the dark. So Holy Spirit, bind each son to the other, make us steadfast honest true, to old Morehouse and her ideals and in all things that we do.

¹ Dr. Emmett D. Carson is CEO and president of Silicon Valley Community Foundation. These remarks reflect his personal views.