Tuskegee University Founder's Day Remarks

Remembering Tuskegee University's Past to Ensure America's Future

Let me begin by thanking President Brian Johnson, the Board of Trustees, faculty, alumni, students and guests for the invitation and the honor to deliver this year's Founder's Day speech. I want to congratulate President Johnson and his management team for the incredible vision, leadership and growth that they have brought to this great university in such a short period of time.

Today's event is very personal for me because, in some ways, I am fulfilling a family dream. My late father, Emmett Carson, Sr., was born in 1920 just before the Great Depression, right up the road, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. As a young man, he had dreams of attending what was then Tuskegee Institute. He saw this school as his way out of poverty and the pathway to a better life for himself and his future family. At the time, Tuskegee Institute had a remarkable program in which qualified kids who had just $200 for tuition could enroll and work their way through school while they took classes. In recounting this story, my father told me that at the time, trying to get $200 seemed to him like trying to get $1 million.

My father was one of the smartest men I have ever known. Self-taught, he could hold his own in talking about world history and science and would regularly win at word games like Scrabble against my wife, Dr. Jacqueline Copeland Carson, and me. Unfortunately, my father was never able to attend Tuskegee and, sadly, was never able to obtain a college degree. Dad, today you finally made it to Tuskegee.

I have always viewed Founder's Day as a day for reflection and renewal. It's a day not just for looking back to the past, but rather to understand the past as a bridge to the present and as a North Star to the future. Today, it is my hope to provoke serious and sustained dialogue about the role of Tuskegee University in solving the difficult challenges facing the African American community. Let me apologize in advance if my remarks startle or disturb some of you – that is not my intent. I believe that our nation is at a dangerous crossroad and that we must find the strength to talk candidly and courageously about the root causes of our problems if we are to solve them.

I would like to use our time together to talk about three things. First, I want to remind us of Tuskegee University's special and unique mission for its students and for the African American community. Second, I want to talk about how the challenges that faced African Americans 135 years ago when Tuskegee University was founded during Jim Crow, seem in some ways, to be reoccurring today. And third, I want to talk about how Tuskegee University's mission remains as relevant today as it was in the past.

Tuskegee University's mission states:

"The results we seek are students whose technical, scientific and professional prowess has been not only rigorously honed, but also sensitively oriented in ways that produce public-spirited graduates who are both competent and morally committed to public service with integrity and excellence. ... The University is rooted in a history of successfully educating African Americans to understand themselves and their society against the background of their total cultural heritage and the promise of their individual and collective future."

There is a great deal to unpack from these two powerful and insightful sentences. In the first sentence, the University states that its goal is to produce outstanding students who are public-spirited and morally committed to public service. Unlike other institutions of higher learning for whom producing outstanding graduates is the end result, for this University developing outstanding students is a necessary, but insufficient first step to the larger purpose of thinking about the whole of our society.
Think about this for a moment – Tuskegee University seeks to train students who will apply their talents to advancing the common
good for everyone, rather than preparing students who are interested in only advancing themselves. I use the phrase advancing the
common good because that is what it means to say “public–spirited” and “morally committed to public service.” In a time of I – iPod,
iPad, iWatch, iTunes, Facebook and Facetime – Tuskegee University wants to produce students who explicitly care about the we,
them and us.

It is this collective good that is the focus of the second sentence of the University’s mission statement. It says that this University
recognizes the “total cultural heritage of African Americans and the promise of both our individual and collective futures.” This state-
ment is an acknowledgement of the historic role that Tuskegee University has played in educating individual African Americans for
the benefit and betterment of all African Americans. It makes clear that notwithstanding America’s promise of opportunity for all, the
journey of African Americans in this country has and remains different from other racial and ethnic groups.

While history seldom, if ever, fully repeats itself, there are parallels from the past that can help us to understand the perils facing us
today. Following the end of slavery in 1865, America entered a period of time known as Reconstruction, which existed from 1866-
1877. With the passage of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, African Americans gained freedom, the right to citizenship and the
right to vote, all of which allowed them to serve on juries, run for public office, buy land and seek employment, among many other
basic rights. During Reconstruction, it is estimated that over 2,000 African Americans held political office, including 14 in the U.S.
House of Representatives, two U.S. Senators, 600 state legislators and the rest locally elected officials throughout the South. While it
was far from being a perfect time, African Americans emerging from slavery enjoyed, what was for them, an unprecedented level of
freedom and equality.

Unfortunately, this period of equality was not to last. As the country confronted a deteriorating economy, and with southern whites
feeling a loss of power and privilege, in part from the electoral success of African Americans, there arose a growing backlash against
African Americans. It was in this environment that Booker T. Washington founded what would become Tuskegee University in 1881.
By 1896, the Supreme Court’s disastrous Plessy v. Ferguson decision made “separate but equal” the law of the land, reversing many
of the political, social and economic gains of the Reconstruction period. In particular, every effort was made to curtail the voting
rights of African Americans, especially in the South. Accompanying this plunge into a legalized second-class citizenship was the
state-sponsored terror and violence that was perpetuated on those African Americans who resisted.

The most common act of violence was to lynch African American men and women, who were often mutilated as well. While the ex-
act number of lynchings is unknown, it is estimated that during Jim Crow, two to three African Americans were lynched every week.
The Alabama-based Equal Justice Initiative recently made worldwide headlines with research showing that in 12 southern states,
early 4,000 African Americans were lynched between 1877-1950. It would take years of peaceful protest and the lives of hundreds
of murdered innocents from domestic terrorism before the Supreme Court would rule that separate is inherently unequal in its
1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. This was followed by the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which removed state
and local barriers to voting that were erected during Jim Crow.

Why this walk down memory lane to dredge up deeply disturbing aspects of our nation’s past? What does any of this have to do with
Tuskegee University today or the contemporary challenges facing African Americans? There is a straight line from Brown v. Board of
Education and the Voting Rights Act to the historic two-term presidency of the first African American President, Barack Obama in
2008. And, just as America had a backlash following Reconstruction and the economic downturn that happened then, we are today
witness to a backlash against President Obama’s presidency coupled with stagnant wages following our recovery from the deepest
downturn in the U.S. economy since the Great Depression. As happened during Reconstruction, there is an open anger that has
emerged and is evident in this Presidential election cycle by a segment of white Americans against African Americans and people of
color in general.
This open anger is due to two factors. First, people of color are becoming the demographic majority in America, and some white Americans believe that this will limit their political and economic opportunities. I will touch on just how self-destructive such thinking is for white America shortly. Unfortunately, this zero-sum game thinking is being encouraged by some of our nation's political leaders. A second factor is the debate over who or what is responsible for stagnant wages and the sense by some that America's best days may be behind us.

It is widely accepted by political pundits that the anger of some white men and women is the source of the upheaval within the current 2016 Republican and Democratic primaries. On the Republican side, this anger has led to the rhetoric to build a wall on the border with Mexico, the rhetoric to deport an estimated 11 million Mexican immigrants, the rhetoric to put American Muslims under surveillance and the rhetoric to ban the entry of all Muslims into the United States. Such rhetoric should be seen for what it is—dangerous to all public-spirited individuals and inconsistent with American principles of freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the right to assembly.

On the Democratic side, the anger at stagnant wages and decreased economic mobility is explained by some as being the sole fault of corporations that focus on maximizing profit by exploiting the poor and the middle class. While not tinged with messages of racism, such arguments fail to understand and articulate what I believe is the larger problem that America has to address.

America is and will be forever inextricably tied to a global economy. The increasing globalization of our world economy means that America, having had one of the highest standards of living, will see a decline in our standard of living as other global economies see a relative rise in their standards of living. Unfortunately, in the current political climate, it is difficult for any candidate running for elected office to acknowledge this economic truism and hope to win.

Let me be clear; these are not, nor are they intended to be, political or partisan statements. I fully understand and respect that both Tuskegee University as well as Silicon Valley Community Foundation are nonpartisan organizations. I am simply sharing well-documented facts, easily verifiable, that cannot and should not be ignored by people of goodwill committed to understanding and advancing the common good for all.

Just as during the early days of Jim Crow, we are seeing a deliberate effort to curtail the voting rights of poor people and people of color. In 2013, the Supreme Court overturned a key provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in Shelby County, Alabama vs. Holder. Since this decision, there have been 22 States that have moved to restrict voting rights. Here in Alabama, a day after the Supreme Court's decision, elected officials announced that they would require all voters to have either a photo ID or be personally vouched for by two poll workers. A subsequent report by Alabama’s Secretary of State estimated that between 250,000-500,000 people would be banned from voting due to the new law. Research has consistently shown that African Americans and Latinos are less likely to have photo identification or be known to poll workers. As you know, for most people, our driver’s license is our primary form of identification. Unbelievably, this story gets even worse.

In August 2015, Alabama’s Governor Bentley announced his plan to shut down 31 Department of Motor Vehicle offices primarily serving poor rural communities and majority African American communities, leaving only four offices open across the state. In response to the national outcry from voting rights advocates, in October of 2015, rather than closing the 31 offices, they will be opened one day a month. Why require previously registered voters to have photo identification and then make such identification significantly harder to obtain? What is the intent of closing the DMV offices that impact those who are poor or African American? What is the burden placed on citizens who now must travel for hours to reach one of the four remaining DMV offices with regular daily office hours or have to juggle their schedules to go to an office that is just open one day throughout the month? Are these actions that can be supported by those who are public-spirited? I will leave it to you to draw your own conclusions.
The parallels to the Jim Crow era do not end with the assault on voting rights. Today we are seeing a spike in violence against African Americans. The year 2015 highlighted that violence against African Americans from unjustified police violence continues seemingly unabated. An August 15, 2014, USA Today article entitled “Local police involved in 400 killings per year,” cited that an African American died at the hands of a white police officer nearly twice a week during a seven-year period ending in 2012. This number of deaths nearly matches the same number of weekly lynchings that were estimated during Jim Crow. This number does not include violence by police against other people of color or violence perpetrated by private citizens against African Americans or other people of color.

Without any question, the police have dangerous jobs and the use of deadly force is, at times, necessary and justified. At the same time, there can be no question that African Americans have, and have had, a distinctly different and life threatening relationship with law enforcement. It is well documented that the criminal justice system has been used in the United States to terrorize African Americans and disproportionately incarcerate us. It is this troubling reality that the Black Lives Matter movement seeks to both bring attention to and change.

For African American students who understand themselves and their society against the background of their total cultural heritage and the promise of their individual and collective future, it is clear that the nonviolent, multi-cultural and multi-racial Black Lives Matter movement is wholly consistent, and comes directly out of, the best traditions of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement.

The feelings of alienation, despair and anger that are held by some in the white community have resulted in a development that we have never seen before. Today, white men aged 40-60 years old are feeling increasingly threatened and emotionally isolated from the new global economy. In fact, a path-breaking study by two Princeton professors shows that white men are literally killing themselves in such record numbers from substance abuse and suicide that it has actually lowered their overall life expectancy. These individuals are simply unable to cope with a loss of white privilege. This too, should be of grave concern to those who are “public-spirited,” because all lives do matter.

Our nation desperately needs the very best trained people in all disciplines who are public-spirited and morally committed to public service. In short, both our nation and the African American community need graduates from Tuskegee University to remember their collective past to ensure America’s future.

Are you, the students of Tuskegee University, up to the challenge of your past to protect America’s future?
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I believe that you are! Thank you.

5 Brad Heath, “Local police involved in 400 killings per year,” USA Today, August 15, 2015 (http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/08/14/po-
lce-killings-data/14060357/)