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A Tribute

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By James E. Cheek
President, Howard University

It must have been an Act of Divine Providence, exercised through the Trustees of Howard University, that resulted in Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson's selection as the university's 13th president on June 30, 1926. For, in his appointment, the character and destiny of Howard were forever changed, and the higher education of the oppressed profoundly affected.

When Dr. Johnson came to this campus 50 years ago, he came with a commission — a commission dictated not solely by the circumstances of his time, the state of the university or the condition of the nation. His commission transcended all of these and he knew better than his contemporaries that he had a Counselor greater than man.

He assumed the presidency keenly aware that he was assuming no easy task and easy challenge. In 1926, if the presidency of Howard had been a bed of roses or a life of gentility, he would not have come.

But he came because he knew that Howard was both the symbol and reality of an oppressed people's road to true emancipation, liberty, equality, dignity, and self-fulfillment.

Looking back, as he did into the long history of man's quest for freedom and hope for peace, he believed with Epictetus — a former Greek slave — that although man had decided that only free men would be educated, God had decreed that only the educated are truly free, he assumed the mantle of leadership of our institution of higher learning with the firm conviction that education was the principal instrument for the liberation of the bondage of the flesh, the bondage of the spirit and the bondage of the mind.

For 34 years he gave to this institution and to this nation the greatest of his energy, the best of his mind, the highest of his vision, the magnificence of his spirit. And all of this, and more, he gave without regard to personal opinion or public approval, or concern for his personal welfare.

When Dr. Johnson came to Howard, its future was uncertain. There was no legislation authorizing the

annual appropriations that Congress had made to the university since 1879. Most of Howard's schools and colleges were unaccredited and the physical plant was inadequate for an institution of Howard's size and scope. Dr. Johnson sought solutions to all of these fundamental problems, and his evident success was recognized throughout the academic world.

As the chief executive officer of the university, Dr. Johnson brought Howard to unprecedented levels of academic achievement and financial support. He attracted to the university a distinguished faculty and successfully expanded the instructional and research resources for new undergraduate and graduate programs.

Dr. Johnson's leadership also placed the university in the front rank of American universities concerned with the training of students from developing countries.

The impact of Dr. Johnson's administration will continue to be felt for generations. His love and dedication to Howard University will long be remembered by thousands of persons whose lives he touched throughout the world.

Like all men who are great — great not by what they possess but great because of what they believe in, pursue and cherish — he endured and suffered through the range of human experiences that great men are called upon to bear in doing their duty, fulfilling their calling and pursuing a mission for the uplift of mankind.

Unafraid to be controversial, and undeterred by obstacles, he rejoiced in hope, was patient in tribulation and continued constant in prayer.

Looking back now upon the deeds he wrought, the works he brought forth, the lives he influenced, the legacies he left to all of us, we now know better than we knew before, that he waited upon the Lord and his strength was renewed, that he mounted up with wings as eagles, he ran and did not become weary, he walked and did not faint.

Dr. Johnson once belonged to the nation, to the world, to us at Howard, and to his family. But as was said of Abraham Lincoln, he now belongs to the ages. □