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A Promise Made, A Promise to Keep:

Many More Rivers To Cross

By James E. Cheek

My classmates and my wife remind me that during my junior year at Shaw University, I led a *coup d'etat* against the university's administration; and at my commencement, the wife of the president — at the reception following the exercises — introduced me to our commencement speaker (Dr. Frederick D. Patterson, president of Tuskegee) as the young man who considered himself as the President of Shaw.

I do remember that episode and I have a vivid recollection of my outrage, which I internally contained, because I thought that that was a mischaracterization of my activities as a student active in student life. I will not deny, because it can be established by the evidence, that as editor of the student newspaper, *The Shaw Journal*, for two years, I visited upon the Shaw administration an awful amount of grief and, I am certain, heartache.

I was eventually expelled from Shaw University by the president, without any due process, and Dr. Asa T. Spaulding, who then was a member of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees, participated in reinstating me.

My expulsion from Shaw was not the first experience of having been booted out of a

hall of learning because the same thing happened in high school during my junior year. There I was editor of *The Panther's Claw*, the student newspaper. Although as an editor of a high school newspaper I had almost no freedom of expression, nonetheless, when a group of students decided in the fall of 1949 to stage a rebellion against the principal, there was a rush to judgment on the part of everyone that such behavior on the part of the student body at Dudley High would not have occurred without my instigation.

I have proclaimed through the years that I was innocent and unjustly accused in the situation that occurred in high school.

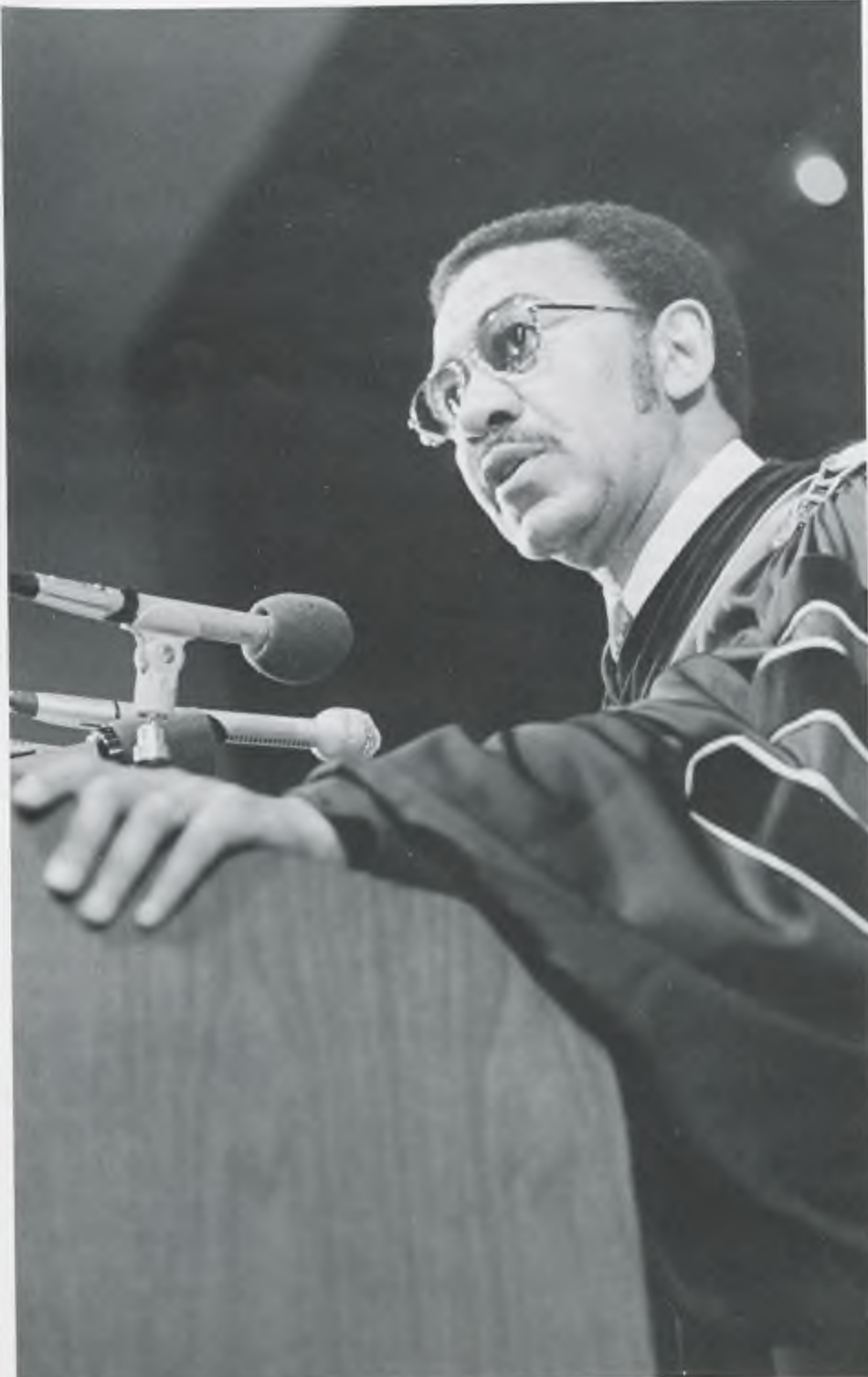
With respect to the action of the president expelling me from Shaw, I acknowledge that I did indeed keep the pot boiling, and I will insist as I insisted then to my dying day that whatever I did as a student activist at Shaw was thoroughly justified.

My classmates remind me that during my college years I was unequivocal about my intention of becoming a college or university president.

Knowing what I knew then about the job of a president of a college and the behavior of college students even in the years of the quiet generation, I do not understand how I could possibly have planned and aspired to become one. My recollection of the plans for my career is that I intended to

... adversity and
resistance from without
and also from within...

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devote my life to teaching students, engaging in research and writing a book a year over a period of 30 years. I intended to become a consummate philosopher-theologian resulting in creating the "Cheek" school of thought as a contribution to man's understanding of himself and of the universe in which we must live.

I know that the record will not be expunged... It might rightly be said that I am living proof of the New Testament observation that what you sow you shall also reap.

Now after almost 21 years, I am reconciled to the fact that I am receiving my just desserts and I seek daily God's forgiveness for the sins of my youth.

Each year during the second week in the month of May there occurs an event on this campus that occurs nowhere else in the world. It is Howard's commencement. What makes this event unique among colleges and universities worldwide is that approximately 2,000 young men and women from almost 50 states, and the District of Columbia, most American territories and sometimes as many as 90 foreign countries — young men and women whose skin color and ethnic heritage is as diverse as the population inhabiting this planet — receive degrees from 17 schools and colleges, ranging from the bachelor's to the doctorate. And sitting close by them in a section of the stadium to their left is the Howard Univer-

8 sity faculty — a group of distinguished scholars: American Black, American white, Africans and Caribbeans, Europeans, Asians from all parts of Asia, men and women from the countries of the Middle East, of South and Central America.

I did not respond to the newspaper articles last spring demanding from me a clarification as to whether Howard University has a policy of racial discrimination. The Howard University commencement alone answers that question more eloquently than any statement I could ever issue.

Let the record show that no other university in this country, comparable to Howard in size, scope and complexity, can so testify! And let the record also show that Howard's testimony on this issue is an uninterrupted demonstration and expression spanning more than a century.

Howard University does have, however, a distinctive mission and this distinctive mission is pursued because the nation in which we exist is so perverse in its racism and because racism is so pervasive in our society.

This university was founded to become one of the instruments through which our racial wounds would be cleansed and healed. For this purpose we were created and toward this end we shall continue.

As we officially observe the formal opening of our 116th year, we do so in an atmosphere of adversity with a gathering storm of resistance to our continuing demand that Howard University is, shall continue to be, and shall forever remain a truly distinguished institution of higher learning.

The adversity and resistance of which I speak is to be found from without, but, sadly to say, also from within.

When I was inaugurated on April 23, 1970, in my inaugural address, I made the following statement:

"By the labor of this institution in the decade of the seventies we shall try to destroy the myth of white supremacy and exalt the reality of human equality. Without apology for our origin, without shame for our

character, and without equivocation about our purpose we shall try to help our nation take an honorable change of direction."

That was a promise made. It remains a promise to keep and that promise remains unfulfilled because this institution and this nation have many more rivers to cross.

On other occasions when I have addressed this community, I have devoted most of what I had to say to issues existing within the larger society. On this occasion, I wish to focus attention on issues within the university community.

I cling to the old-fashioned concept that a university is a community of scholars. I include in that concept all constituent components of our institution.

During the past 14 years, our energies and attention have been devoted to the problem of our resources: our fiscal, our human and physical resources as a necessary and vital requirement to undertaking and sustaining truly distinguished teaching, research and learning. On many occasions you have heard me say that while adequate resources do not guarantee truly distinguished scholarship, one cannot lay claim to being a truly distinguished institution without the essential resources in sufficient quantity that can be regarded as adequate.

We first undertook the task of analyzing our resource foundation and we confirmed what we really already knew: viz., that by comparison with other universities of like size, scope, and complexity, this institution was still suffering from a lingering legacy of neglect and deprivation.

With that confirmation we undertook the task of resource planning. And while continuing our activity in planning, we embarked upon an effort of resource development aimed toward the federal government as well as the private sector on a scale that was both national and international.

Out of the process characterizing the past 14 years and recognizing that much of the foundation had already been estab-

lished, we have become a university whose operating budget has increased ten-fold. Our centers of teaching, research and community services are to be found in 17 schools and colleges, 12 research institutes and centers; an institution with such supporting services as a radio station, a television station, a new teaching and research hospital, a university press and a hotel to function as a teaching laboratory.

During this same period our faculty has quadrupled in numbers and the supporting administrative staff has increased substantially.

New buildings have been constructed and much needed land area has been acquired.

Despite this growth in our quantitative resources, I still maintain that there continues to exist some areas of deficiency in our resources. We are still required to continue the task of gathering the tools to perform our task.

Everything that has occurred in increasing our resources during the past 14 years has occurred because of the continuing commitment of both the executive and legislative branches of our federal government; because of the active and enthusiastic participation of our trustees, administrative staff, alumni, our faculty, our students, foreign nations, and our friends — some friends of long standing and other friends newly acquired.

Beginning this fiscal year we have undertaken the task of resource evaluation and consolidation. Although we have been engaged in such an activity throughout the preceding period, the process of self-examination and evaluation upon which we have now embarked is more comprehensive, more deliberate, more thorough and more permanent in its impact and results than ever before.

Last April, the Board of Trustees adopted a resolution requiring that we develop and present to it a realistic and definitive plan to eliminate the university's accumulated deficit and to control expenditures within available revenues.

Pursuant to that mandate, we have begun to examine every program and every activity in which we are engaged. No area of the university will be exempt from this examination and evaluation be it administrative, academic, supporting services or auxiliary enterprises. I have interpreted this mandate of the trustees to go beyond the elimination of a fiscal deficit but inclusive of insuring that every program we offer, every activity we engage in, and every service we perform be essential, necessary but most importantly of all that it be of such unquestioned quality that it will compel acknowledgement of its being not just good but better than the best.

... we do not have to be rude to demonstrate authority...

An impossible task, you may ask? My response is No. A difficult task? The answer is Yes! And why, we must ask, is this task difficult? The answer is to be found quite simply in the strongly-held belief that a predominantly Black institution can never be as good as or better than a predominantly white institution of higher learning. This is a mighty river with numerous streams and tributaries that in the 1980s we still have to cross!

A few years ago, one of our trustees who happens to be white—after reviewing the resources and touring the facilities of one of our professional schools—stated to me without any qualifying adjectives: “Jim, there is no reason why this school should not be among the top ten of such schools in our country.” When I had the opportunity to share this trustee’s views with the dean of that school, the dean responded by saying: “the only way that will ever happen is that we change the predominant racial character of our student popu-

lation.” My response to that dean cannot be stated in this [presentation]...

There is no place at Howard University for any person in any kind of position who holds such a belief! There is no place at all!

Every individual associated with Howard must have the conviction that this institution is sacred, that it is the instrument of our people’s salvation and the instrument of our nation’s redemption.

We cannot be mediocre; we cannot tolerate mediocrity. We cannot be sloven; we cannot accept slovenliness. We cannot be idle, and we cannot indulge idleness.

At Howard University there is no loose change with which to gamble, there can be no spare parts that can be put in storage, and there is no time with which to play.

Because of what this university was created to do, because of what this university is, because of what it means and because of what we are required to accomplish, we cannot be just another university occupying space on the landscape of American higher education. We are required to create paths in a myriad of wildernesses unexplored. It is demanded that we climb mountains never before scaled. It is compelled that we build bridges across rivers that other institutions have refused or feared to cross.

Let it be known across this land and beyond the oceans and the seas that Howard University cannot pay administrators full-time dollars for half-hearted service; we cannot accommodate full-time teachers for part-time teaching and research. And let it be known, we simply have no room for full-time students who do not intend to be full-time learners.

And while we are making these things known not by proclamation and affirmation but by our performance and our manifest deeds, let us pledge to ourselves and one to the other some very, very simple things so easy for all of us to do: let us make up our minds and so demonstrate by our behavior that we do not have to be

rude to demonstrate authority, that we will not create or perpetuate rumors but rather that our actions and reactions, because we are indeed scholars, will be based upon confirmed and documented information. Let us decide that whatever turbulence we may cause be creative and not destructive, that no one of us will bite the hand that feeds us, and under no conditions will we take part in actions that attempt to muzzle the ox that tread out the corn.

Let us shout it from every hilltop, let us sing it in every valley, let us preach it in every classroom, research laboratory, every library, every dormitory, every administrative office, and in the trustee board room that Howard University stands as a mighty treasure, a precious jewel, given as a gift from God and entrusted to our keeping for just a passing moment of time and when we pass it on it will be more valuable to our people and our nation and to the world than when it was passed to us. □

The above was excerpted from a speech by the university president at Howard’s Opening Convocation, September 23, 1983.