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THE WILDERNESS OF THE MATRIX OF IDEAS
(TOWARD A HOUSTONIAN SCHOOL OF JURISPRUDENCE)

By J. Clay Smith, Jr.*

President (James E.) Cheek, Acting Dean (Oliver) Morse and other members of the decanal office, Justice (Thurgood) Marshall, colleagues, participating speakers, guests and members of the graduating law Class of 1985. I wish to thank the Class of 1985 for inviting me to bring brief remarks at this the unveiling of the of Charles Hamilton Houston bust commissioned by the Class of 1985.

The world is managed by men and women who believe in principles drawn from universal ideas. Even before man recognized the need to record the meaning and interpretation of words, principles were carefully passed onto the most learned citizens of the state so that the future might be secured according to the mandate of the principle. The written and unwritten principles of the human specie have survived the centuries on the acceptability of the principle drawn from the universe of the ideas. The science of law is a derivative of ideas; law is classified by principles; law is a system which cooperatively assists in the management of humankind. Law is, as my esteemed

*Professor of Law, Howard University School of Law. This statement was made on the occasion of the unveiling of a bust of Charles Hamilton Houston commissioned by the Law Class of 1985 in the James A. Cobb Moot Courtroom on May 9, 1985. The law school has been the recipient of one other major art work from a sculptor. In 1965 Jacob Lipkin of New York presented a bar relief of John Brown to the law school which is housed in the A. Mercer Daniel Law Library. By separate Proclamations of the Mayor of the District of Columbia, Marion Barry, and President James E. Cheek, on behalf of the Board of Trustees of Howard University, May 9, 1985 has been designated as Charles Hamilton Houston Day in the District of Columbia and Howard University.

colleague, Professor Herbert O. Reid, Sr., has taught, the sum total of rules and regulations governing human conduct for which there is state sanction.

Dr. Charles Hamilton Houston, the man that we honor today whose bust will grace the building which also bears his name was a pioneer in the forest of the matrix of ideas seeking to identify the principles drawn from ideas which he determined restricted his people to an inferior status as a matter of law.

The forest of the matrix in which Houston spent his life was entangled with conflicting configurations and models about the origins of man, the duties and obligations of the state to its subjects and the corresponding duties of subjects to the state. Houston learned and he observed the passion of men and women eager to sacrifice their lives and institutions for historic first principles drawn from the universe of ideas.

"Is it true," Houston must surely have asked, "that men and women can believe so much in an idea that in order to protect or promote the idea they would risk their lives, or sacrifice their lives or institutions?" The answer is yes. "Is it also true," Houston must surely have asked, "whether men and women --on the basis of their commitment to an idea -- will sacrifice their lives to further an idea represented in the embodiment of an institution?" The answer is yes.

Houston must also have asked, "Is it true that in both instances men and women armed with a idea are better able to maintain their lives or their institutions than a man or woman whose cognitive powers are

misdirected or unchallenged?" The answer is yes. It is these questions that Houston pondered as he formulated his thoughts and chiseled his ideas into time: time which would compel legal scholars to revisit -- as Houston knew they would -- his sacrifice and commitment to establish the equitable participation of his race within the institution of the state. Houston knew that no thinker of the law could protect himself or his idea from destruction nor effectively promote his idea for general implementation unless the thinker was anchored in the wilderness of the matrix of ideas.

It was in the wilderness of the matrix that Houston unraveled the knots that subordinated Black Americans within a constitutional democracy. He traced the history of the ideas and discovered how ideas that mankind had thought were dead had in fact survived the assassinated law givers. Houston recognized the need for intellectual competition to combat the negative themes that plagued his people and limited their progress. This recognition freed Houston from the wilderness of the matrix with an intelligence which enabled him to implement notions of law and social justice which coordinated and eventually became the legal thrust of the modern civil rights movement.

The wilderness of the matrix is populated with the thoughts and principles of many men and women. So powerful are the ideas of some men and women that schools of thought bear their name. If you call the name of Aristotle or St. Paul, one thinks of the traditional natural law, or the name Hobbes, one thinks of realistic jurisprudence, or the name of Austin, one thinks of analytical jurisprudence. The ideas of each of these thinkers

live on today because of men and women who believe in notions of justice and government that these law givers created.

If I called the name of Charles Hamilton Houston, what tradition of law, what school of thought comes to mind? There is no other way for us to learn the true identity of Houston until we trace his steps in the universe of ideas and discover which ideas he adopted to wage his war against racism and after which men and women he modeled his mind.

Hence, the legal profession is indebted to Genna Rae McNeil for her historic biography of Houston and William H. Hastie. Other scholars must now begin the long and arduous task of sorting out the pieces so that when we call Houston's name, his principles and his ideas will spring forth from the minds of students who have discovered Houston's benchmarks in the wilderness of the matrix. It is from the minds of students that the Houstonian School of Jurisprudence will eventually be accepted.

In closing, on September 3, 1985, we will commemorated the 90th Anniversary of Houston's birth. The graduating Class of 1985 -- by donating the Houston bust, sculptured by the distinguished Randall J. Craig, Sr., have opted to leave as its legacy an idea for generations of law students who will enter these hollowed walls. I interpret this gift as one calling for students and teachers at the Law School to explore the ever increasing mysterious nature of the universe of ideas so that we can -- in the Houston tradition -- set new men and women afoot to determine the ideas which will secure our survival, and a just universe.