

New Directions

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 10

1-1-1977

Editorials

Editorial Staff

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Recommended Citation

Staff, Editorial (1977) "Editorials," *New Directions*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 10.
Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol4/iss2/10>

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Editorials

20 The Washington Star

Mordecai W. Johnson saw far and saw clearly. The embodiment, but not the horizon, of his vision was the transformation of Howard University in 34 years under his leadership from an educational gesture to a mature and vigorous institution. The influence of Dr. Johnson, who died Friday at the age of 86, and of Howard, has permeated the long march of Black Americans toward a full sharing in the nation's ideals.

It is probably true that those most deserving of eulogy usually are those who least need it. Their works, and their words, are adequate. But it is true, also, that most of our memories are short and that younger memories are shorter yet. So it is worth recalling the imprint an individual may have on his times.

In 1927, the young Baptist preacher was inaugurated as the first Black president of Howard University — though “university” was more an aspiration than description then. His address was eloquent, the more so from a distance of half a century. It was, in part, a sermon: “Howard University exists in order that when the simple and the poor cry out for fundamental things that their hearts must have if they are to reach the goal of a normal and happy life, slaves shall be prepared with competent minds to see that the heart's desire of the people shall not fail. If it be the ambition of any institution to prepare servants for the American people, I say that Howard University seeks that preeminent greatness which comes to those who try to make ready themselves and their associates to be the slaves of the people.”

There was in his philosophy no passivity, no acceptance of the image to which racism and ignorance consigned generations of Black Americans. Rather, Dr. Johnson challenged, fought tenaciously and at risk, for the ideals of racial equality. He knew acutely, even in 1927, that the manner in which this nation responded was far more than a domestic matter.

In that same inaugural address, he said: “It is not necessary for the world to wait to see what we are going to do in our foreign relations in order to find

out what the trend is going to be, because the United States of America has a barometer within the nation. It has twelve millions of the disadvantaged peoples of the world in its own bosom. What is done as regards the Negro in this country is a signal and unfailing indication of the temper of the American spirit and of the character and intent of the American mind, and it will resound in the halls of all the world.”

It is extraordinary how apposite his comments remain after 49 years. They emphasize the prophetic observation of W. E. B. DuBois early in the century that the problem of the 20th Century is the problem of color — a realization becoming even more obvious at this moment.

There is no need to detail the career and accomplishments of Mordecai Johnson here. The university and its graduates speak to that. Suffice to say that despite the intimidating distance yet to be traveled in this multi-racial society, Dr. Johnson was a supplier of strong and honest mortar for the bricks so far in place. He acted on a vision, a vision of Black dignity and of human dignity. □

The Washington Star
September 15, 1976
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The Washington Post

It was no mere coincidence that the growth of Howard University from a weak, unaccredited secondary school/college into a recognized center of learning occurred during the 34-year presidency of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson. Dr. Johnson, who died here a week ago at the age of 86, had the vision, determination and administrative skills to bring about this transformation, which at times involved bitter struggles just to keep Howard alive. Though this achievement would have been enough to gain him worldwide recognition as an educator, it was by no means the full measure of his greatness. Mordecai Johnson's most important contribution to America and the Negro was that he provided the climate in which were forged the instruments that overthrew Jim Crow.



While systematically building Howard in size and educational scope, Dr. Johnson, the university's first Black president, meticulously shaped the university into a powerful force for change: He attracted the scholars who would eventually plan court battles leading to desegregation of institutions across the land. He entrusted to Charles Hamilton Houston, a brilliant lawyer, the job of turning Howard's shaky night law school into a law school whose faculty and alumni tell the story of its achievement: the late Judge William H. Hastie, Associate Justice Thurgood Marshall and later, U.S. District Judges Joseph W. Waddy and William B. Bryant and U.S. Appeals Court Judge Spottswood W. Robinson III.

Dr. Johnson's pursuit of talent was not limited to the law school; he built up the medical and dental schools, strengthened the schools of education and the ministry and opened others, including the School of Social Work. And his vision of the accomplishments of Black and other peoples stretched to foreign affairs. He became a close follower of the teachings of Gandhi, delivering lectures on the philosophy of nonviolence to such students as Andrew Young, who later would join Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the great nonviolent crusade that picked up where the Houston legal crusade left off.

As a man who demanded high standards and who spoke out strongly against Howard's congressional critics, Dr. Johnson was by no means universally loved. Indeed, he could be abrasive, short and even overbearing. But he was a man who inspired one sentiment that he in turn cherished for his people: respect. And even after he retired as president of Howard in 1960, Dr. Johnson's active interest in education continued. As a member of the city's School Board from 1962 to 1965, he was a frequent critic of the track system used in elementary schools at the time, and he maintained that the school system was prejudicial to Blacks because schools in Black neighborhoods were getting less money and because teacher appointments were selectively made to preclude Blacks from receiving quality education.

During these decades in which Dr. Johnson was laboring to eliminate racial injustice and to reinforce

the principle of academic freedom, his presence in this community was understandably formidable. It will continue to be felt for generations. □

The Washington Post
September 17, 1976
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WTOP/TV 9

From William Styron to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a parade of poets and politicians have, in recent years, impugned the manhood of Black men in the development of our nation. Styron and Moynihan would have us believe, with considerable error in their history and social science, that from slave rebellion to welfare cheating, Black men have been unable to defend or take care of their own.

Well they should learn of the history of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson — a Black man who was accused of many things in his life — but was never accused of being weak or missing from the case.

He was a true patriarch, around whom was built a family of academic institutions, whose fame spread around the world.

Mordecai Johnson spent 34 troubled and troublesome years building Howard into a major university. He was undaunted by the lynchings of the 20s, the depression of the 30s, the wars of the 40s and the anti-communist smears of the 50s. The school grew from 1700 to 6000 students, from a budget of 700,000 to 8 million dollars. And he brought to his side Charles Houston, Thurgood Marshall, William Hastie, Charles Drew, Montague Cobb, Ralph Bunche and E. Franklin Frazier — giants in law, medicine and human studies.

And Black men are rarely accused of being visionaries — men whose principles are found valid by the test of time. Dr. Johnson's were. Before his recent death, his philosophies became common practice.

He pioneered day care centers to save thousands of children from delinquency. He argued that Blacks in D.C. schools got prejudicial treatment in the

22 assignment of money and teachers. The courts eventually supported him, even after they refused to uphold his membership on the School Board. And, finally, the “detente” he described 25 years ago has become our foreign policy. He was charged with “advocating communism.” But what he preached, Henry Kissinger now practices, peace with the Russians.

Mordecai Johnson was a strong patriarch and a remarkable visionary. A kind of Biblical cross between Abraham and Isaiah. However much he struggled alone, his faith in himself and in his beliefs never wavered. It stood as strong as the buildings he raised up and the students who marched forth. □

WTOP-TV 9

Commentary by Wallace Terry

The Hilltop

It is difficult to adequately convey a true description of the late Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson in an editorial. A human being such as Dr. Johnson would require more time and space than *The Hilltop* could offer. Perhaps Dr. Michael Winston put it best when he stated last May on the 50th Anniversary of the Election of Dr. Johnson:

“Mordecai Wyatt Johnson defies description. His commanding presence on the platform, his powerful will, his poetic imagination and deep spirituality made an incredible impression on the thousands of persons who saw him in action. His transformation of Howard was phenomenal and fundamental. No president before him had served longer than 13 years, which provided not only the stability necessary for the successful development of a new educational program, but also a coherence of academic, ethical and social values that lifted Howard to a new level of distinction among universities of the world.”

Dr. Johnson was a scholar among scholars, a president among presidents, a man among men — but even more importantly he was his own man. He was not slow to criticize slovenly standards, racism,

imperialism, or any species of intolerance and injustice. He held up to withering scrutiny Black as well as white leadership in civic, religious and economic life. Dr. Johnson rejected the view that the university ought to avoid critical analysis of social and economic issues. Very early in his administration he made it clear that he would not sacrifice freedom of thought for increased support from private philanthropy or the Federal Government.

On June 3rd, 1929 in his Baccalaureate Address, he said to the graduates and faculty:

“The Negro in America, like the masses of all other people today needs a leadership which is anxious to have him realize his fullest possibilities. The greatest need of the nation is not men in power to control the people who enforce the law, but men in service of the government who love the people and set the example of law observance.

“The danger confronting the nation is not petty crime, but enormous and farsighted greed of men of superior intellect, who in order to satisfy this greed and make themselves and their families secure forever, would throttle, choke and keep the people down.”

Dr. Mordecai Johnson’s criticism of inequality and injustice was not confined to the United States, even in the Great Depression. He saw that the “implications of the social dislocations of industrialization were global, that the problem of the Negro in the United States was a part of a world-wide system of injustice that had to be corrected.”

It is not surprising to us that Dr. Johnson was a controversial figure. His reorganization of the university was controversial. When he first became president of Howard University, 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. He sought solution to all the fundamental problems and his evident success was recognized throughout the academic world.

In the first nine years of this 34-year presidency, the capital assets of the university tripled; the book 3



collections of its libraries doubled; scientific equipment in its laboratories tripled; the full time faculty increased by 98.7 percent, and for the first time in the university's history uniform standards for promotion and tenure were adopted. Twenty new buildings were constructed during his presidency. As president of Howard, he attracted more leading Black scholars to the university's faculty than ever before. Howard's international reputation grew on the basis of the outstanding faculty that was without rival in other predominantly Black institutions, and was on a comfortable equality with many of the stronger white universities.

The purpose of education, he insisted, was not only to free the individual mind, but to be the instrumentality for lifting from humiliation, degradation and squalor the vast millions of poor people in the whole world. He saw Howard as a vital center for such democratic and constructive education. He realized that Howard's opportunity was not only national but international in scope.

Dr. Johnson supported militant opposition to all forms of segregation and exploitation. He encouraged the Howard University Law School to become, in Charles H. Houston's phrase, "the West Point of the Civil Rights Movement." Indeed, it was during Dr. Johnson's presidency when the Howard Law School became instrumental in winning the *Brown Vs The Board of Education* decision by the Supreme Court. Dr. Johnson suffered great criticism for speaking out on national and international questions. In the 1930s and 1940s, he was bitterly attacked as a radical, and the claim was made in many newspapers that he was teaching communism at Howard. Congressional investigations of Dr. Johnson and the Howard faculty were urged. Powerful politicians made repeated threats to cripple the university through reduction or elimination of the Federal Government's annual appropriation. However, Dr. Johnson did not retreat. He held Howard firm as a bastion of free inquiry and expression.

It would be a great mistake to imagine that the impact of Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson on Howard University may be summed up in statistics on growth

in financial and physical resources, the size of the faculty, or any of the other commonly used objective measurements of progress. By all of these criteria, his administration won national and international acclaim. But a university is by nature of its being defined by mind and spirit. Its most fundamental activities cannot be measured physically. The excitement of discovery in research, of the shaping of young minds in teaching, of preparing professionals for competent service to the community — all of these are activated by values, beliefs and conceptions of the purposes of human life. To these values Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson was dedicated; to these values we must all be dedicated.

The loss of Dr. Johnson won't just be felt during our lifetime, but for generations to come. □

The Hilltop
September 17,
1976