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Mordecai Wyatt Johnson

A Model of Leadership in Higher Education

28 By Broadus N. Butler

In recent years, the dominant anomaly of higher education leadership has been the effort to shape the image of the college and university presidency in the mold of the management executive rather than that of the educational administrator. This shift has resulted from very profound changes in society as well as in higher education. There have been some advantages and even necessities in the emphasis upon management, but there also are fundamental losses to the institutions, to the society and to the university administrators which have become costly because of peculiarities which are endemic to higher education. Some of these peculiarities affect the meaning of educational leadership itself.

The presidency has ceased to have either the emulative, the academic or the moral charismatic quality which it once had to inspire scholarly excellence and to preserve institutional integrity. It has allowed itself not only to become almost exclusively managerial, but it has projected entrepreneurship rather than scholarship as the most rewarding function of the professoriate of academic institutions. The result for institutions has been heightened faculty economic self-interest activity and professional monetary motivation and litigation in the instructional arena, as well as in research and consultation entrepreneurship. Collegiality is being superceded by arbitration through collective faculty and staff negotiation. [At the opening of the 1976 school year, over 200,000 students were interrupted in their schooling because 21,000 teachers were on strike. In other cases, there have been interruptions owing to protest demonstrations, racial controversies, and a variety of other situations. Recently a rash of articles and studies has entertained the question why student test and academic performance appears to be lessening in quality. In none of the articles or studies is there a recognition of the relationship between the climate engendered and sustained by those strikes, interruptions, disruptions and controversies and such decline in student performance. Nor has it been recognized that the only real loser in protracted

There were 203 teachers' strikes in the last academic year, and more than that number are expected this year.] These have emerged largely at the sacrifice of some integrity in scholarship and instruction and even in moral responsibility at the expense to the customary interpretation of moral responsibility to students in the conduct of academic institutions.

In consequence, insecurity and high turnover in the chief academic leadership offices are commonplace. Security, where it does prevail, is based on political and arbitration skill about economic matters, rather than in scholarly and moral stewardship. The average length of tenure in office by university presidents has reduced from more than 10 years to less than 5 years in the past decade. More than 300 institutions experience changes of presidents each year. There is a costly and unnecessary reflection of the prevailing national insecurity of leadership, and a sign of serious diminution of the essential integrity of the office of president in higher education.

Presidential Model

There are historical alternatives to the present image and circumstance of the university presidency. Some of them should be reviewed, especially, in counterpoint to the recent years of crisis management instead of affirmative presidential leadership. One model which combined uniqueness, durability and inspirational leadership based upon the combination of clarity of scholarly integrity and indomitable moral fortitude is that of the late Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, who served Howard University from 1926 to 1960.

The ascendancy of Dr. Johnson to the presidency of Howard in 1926 came in a period not unlike the turbulent years of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He was appointed from a pastorate in Charleston, West Virginia, but his academic credentials included degrees from Morehouse College, the University of Chicago, Rochester Theological Seminary and Harvard University. His election broke a 60-year tradition at Howard by bringing the first Black scholar to that office. This selection was against the currents of strong collective opposition to outsiders

by some of Howard's own faculty members and administrators, as well as by some trustees and politicians.

In the depression years following World War I, the problems of trying to get support for any institution of Howard's mission and its then unaccredited status, in spite of her scholarly promise, were multiplied tenfold as compared to the present. As a matter of fact, the strongest opposition to Dr. Johnson by the Black members of the faculty was not so much that Dr. Johnson should come from the outside as the belief that no Black president could get sufficient money from foundations and the Federal Government to support the institution. But Dr. Johnson's initial election was exceeded only by the miracle of his long and exceptional administration — an administration that must be understood and appreciated through the quality and character of his person as well as Howard's contributions to this nation and to the world under his leadership. Since 1926, Dr. Johnson's personal significance was accentuated and transcended only by his brilliant and spellbinding eloquence as a speaker. He built and brought to highest academic excellence both an institution and a community of scholars which was dedicated to community service and, at the same time, saw the people of the whole world as its community.

Howard today is a truly international institution because Dr. Johnson made it so. He attracted to Howard the largest, most brilliant and productive assemblage of scholars and put them to the task of leading an international faculty and student body. That faculty addressed the widest range of national and international problems of any comparable institution in the United States. It did so under a special duress not shared by any other institution, because of the inescapable direct involvement of Howard in national, social, and political affairs, and in international problems. Because of Dr. Johnson's perception of Howard's responsibility to international education and scholarship, a special and unique responsibility of Howard's larger educational mission was its humanity-oriented services. The university

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has had for many years a higher proportion of foreign students than any other comparable American university, and its faculty has sent forth one of the largest cadres of researchers, consultants, lecturers and diplomats into international fields throughout the world. As significant as that may be for the appreciation of Dr. Johnson and his distinguished successors — Dr. James M. Nabrit, Jr., and Dr. James E. Cheek — as one looks over the past half century of Howard, the great hallmark of excellence of that institution has been its pioneering in areas of community service, scholarship and endeavor which were earlier overlooked by other institutions, but which now occupy the central attention of universities and the national government.

When one thinks of the truly pioneering scholars who were assembled at Howard, the major contributions which they made, and even the organizations and institutions which they conceived and sponsored as services to the nation and to the world through their scholarship; the problem is where to stop, not where to begin. The distinguished names are legion, and the fields of their endeavor are universal. The unique contributions of the faculty to the fields of literature, art, religion, philosophy, law, history, human rights, civil rights, international diplomacy, science, technology, medicine, public health, social work, family life, race relations, professional education and to every other field that is definitive about the enhancement and the advancement of the quality of human life in the nation are distinctly etched as the major recollection of the Mordecai Johnson years.

Let all of the great names in African-American scholarship and research be chronicled, and the recognition of the impact upon their lives and work by Howard is almost inevitable. Let major programs, organizations and services come to mind, and the searching realization that they are the products of the minds and work of Howard scholars is sometimes surprising. The impact is only now beginning to be known and appreciated, thanks to the pioneering archival work genius of Dr. Dorothy Porter as director of the Moorland-Spingarn archival collection

30 and her successor, Dr. Michael Winston. Even though it is late, that recognition is evolving.

Scholarship and International Service

The legion of Howard's men and women and some of their distinguished pioneering contributions are only partially exemplified in the lives and works of such scholars as Dean Kelly Miller and Dean Frank M. Snowden; Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and the *Journal of Negro History* and his successor, Dr. Charles H. Wesley; Dr. Leo Hansberry, the founder of the African-American Institute and pioneer of the encyclopedia of African history; Dr. Alain Locke, the philosopher chronicler of the Negro Literary and Artistic Renaissance; Dr. Ernest E. Just, the early pioneer in marine biology, Dr. Rayford Logan and John Hope Franklin who have made permanent contributions in the re-interpretations of American history; Dr. James Porter, in the arts of printing and sculpture; Dr. Todd Duncan, in music and concert arts; Dr. Owen Dodson, in the performing arts; Dr. Howard Thurman and Dr. Mordecai Johnson himself, in religion and theology; Dr. Flemmie W. Kittrell, in child and family life, and others of equal distinction.

The accomplishments of Dr. W. Montague Cobb in pioneering the first audio-visual course in anatomy, in the editorship of the *Journal of the National Medical Association* and in being one of the basic catalysts and conceptualizers of the present national Medicaid program were part of an impressive history of innovative, socially oriented contributions which centered in the College of Medicine — under Deans Numa P. Adams and John W. Lawlah — and the College of Dentistry, under Dean Russell Dixon. Mankind is the beneficiary of the technique of production and preservation of blood plasma which saved Britain in World War II and recognized Dr. Charles R. Drew as the father of the blood bank. It is equally the beneficiary of the pioneering work of Dr. Percy Julian, who made the production of cortisone economically feasible. Dr. Drew and Dr. Julian were firmly in the tradition of Dr. Daniel Hale Williams,

director of Freedmen's Hospital, who earlier pioneered in heart surgery and hospital organization. Dr. Numa P. Adams and others in the health professions made their lives symbols of the highest traditions of the healing arts. These individuals, their work, their frustrations and their successes are part of the Johnson kaleidoscope and the Howard mystique of pioneering and often disconcerting excellence.

The quest for peace in the Middle East by Howard's Nobel Laureate, Dr. Ralph J. Bunche, is well known. He, 30 years ago, pioneered the concept and performance of shuttle diplomacy when he led the United Nations team in the initial negotiations which established the state of Israel in 1948. Dr. Bunche continued in the service of the world as director of the Trusteeship Division of the United Nations until his death in 1972. He was joined in international diplomacy by such other distinguished Howard scholars, ambassadors and international representatives as Dr. Rayford Logan, Dr. Leo Hansberry, Ambassador Mercer Cook, Ambassador James Nabrit, Ambassador Patricia Harris, Dr. Charles Drew, Dr. Hildrus A. Poindexter, Dean Clarence Ferguson, Dr. Dorothy Ferebee, Ambassador Samuel Z. Westerfield, Dean Frank Snowden, Dr. Merze Tate, and Attorney Hobart Taylor, Jr. among others.

National Contributions

Probably the greatest and most enduring service to the total domestic life of the nation was to the civil rights movement, through the achievements and the leadership of Howard law professors. Beginning with School of Law Dean Charles H. Houston, who was the architect of the legal structure of the NAACP and the civil rights movement, law dean, (later a federal judge) William H. Hastie, law dean and subsequently Howard President James M. Nabrit, law dean and subsequently Federal Appeals Court Judge Spottswood W. Robinson III, a student who became Supreme Court Justice, Thurgood Marshall, and students who became U.S. District Judges, Joseph W. Waddy and William B. Bryant. Those legal minds pioneered the early Southern case strategy, developed

the legal laboratory and conceived the constitutional precedents which brought about the final and conclusive recognition of the primacy of person over property by instating "due process" into its proper constitutional status. A series of 32 cases from 1938, including the climactic *Brown vs. Topeka* of 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were the achievements of the Howard Law Laboratory and the NAACP legal staff. It may truly be said that the success of the NAACP and of the subsequent coalition of civil rights organizations was built upon the legal wisdom and the personal courage of those pioneers at Howard.

The real cornerstones of any society are the institutions of family, health, education and community. The contributions of Howard University to the interpretation of family structures by Professor E. Franklin Frazier and the pioneering services to the improvement of child care and family life by Dr. Flemma Kittrell and Dr. Paul Cornely in their respective fields again illustrate the comprehensive outreach of the higher education mission of Dr. Johnson's era. The university pioneered in the field of physics, engineering and technology under the leadership of Dr. Herman Branson, and in recent years has attracted to the faculty the present president of the American Atomic Energy Society, Dr. J. Ernest Wilkins. He is, among other distinctions, a fellow of the National Academy of Physics and Engineering.

The American Council on Education and virtually every other national organization and foundation involved with higher education have received the benefit of Dr. Johnson's counsel and services since the early days. His wisdom was sought particularly in the late 1940s when the formulation and clarification of national higher education policy became an imperative which included a definitive commitment to bring the benefits of higher education to the broadest spectrum of people in the American society. He lent counsel to the 1947 first President's Commission on Higher Education, headed by Dr. George F. Zook, then president of the American Council on Education. The subsequent pioneering

development of such organizations as the Institute for Services to Education and the establishment of the National Upward Bound Program represent further ventures in forwarding those commitments. In particular, it would be appropriate to cite the dedicated work of Dr. Herman Branson, chairman of the Department of Physics, and Dr. Lettie Austin Federson of the Department of English and Dr. W. Kermit McAllister of the Department of Philosophy in the days of the great society promise of the mid-1960s.

The nation has felt the impact and the great spirit and intellect of Dr. Johnson in another significant respect. It is important to note that Dr. Johnson's university sent directly from its faculties a distinguished cadre of college and university presidents who have conveyed their marks of excellence to other institutions, and through their work enhanced the quality of education. Among those are Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, president emeritus of Morehouse College, Dr. Charles Wesley, president emeritus of Wilberforce and Central State Universities, Dr. Martin Jenkins, president emeritus of Morgan State University, and Dr. Herman Branson of Lincoln University, to name a few.

Vision and Wisdom

Dr. Mordecai Johnson was a leader who saw his mission as being to a whole world. He exercised his leadership through the genius of creating a climate of responsible resourcefulness which attracted the best scholars and maintained high standards of performance and mutual respect within a context of high achievement competition. Most important, he enabled the scholars to do their work unencumbered by pettiness and administrative restraint. He maintained a climate of responsible collegiality and demanded excellence both in teaching and in research.

Fifty years have gone by and Howard stands today before the nation and the higher education community as an extension of the shadow of Dr. Johnson, who was a living symbol and inspiration to those who are still endeavoring to preserve those

32 qualities which are represented in his life and leadership.

It is a final tribute to the wisdom of the institution and to the value of the presidency of Dr. Johnson that the issue of mandatory retirement was handled in a manner which may provide another unique precedent for the present critical problem of respectably and considerably preserving the value of distinguished persons in spite of chronology. In 1955, Dr. Johnson reached the mandatory age of retirement. This was the critical year of the beginning of the aftermath of the 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation in which the School of Law and the faculty had been the primary instrumentality and laboratory for the progression of NAACP legal cases from the 1930s. A change of administration of the university might not only have weakened the delicate arrangement with the NAACP which then prevailed, but may well have made the entire civil rights effort vulnerable to the kind of attacks that the institution itself had to weather in the 1930s.

Without the secure durability and integrity of leadership which was already assured in the person of Dr. Johnson, the outcome would have been uncertain at best. So the institution exercised a rare quality of wisdom which is often required but seldom performed. It transcended procedures and regulations without violating them. It retired Dr. Johnson as required by procedure but immediately rehired him on a fixed five-year contract which was required by wisdom.

The decision by the Committee on Retirement, and the unanimous vote of the Board of Trustees, eventuated in the selection of a distinguished successor, Dr. James M. Nabrit, who not only fulfilled all of the normative criteria which the university had evolved in its presidential search deliberation but also had been a prime architect and field general of the civil rights legal strategies in the distinguished succession of Deans Charles Houston and William H. Hastie. He was a recognized and respected legal and constitutional scholar who was then secretary of the university, dean of the School of Law and director of

Lesson for Leadership

The times may call for a different administrative emphasis. But all times, including the present, call for special qualities of leadership which transcend those frequently encountered and encouraged styles which happen to be in vogue. Perhaps higher education would again benefit from such special qualities of courage, integrity and scholarly discipline which characterized the leadership and person of Dr. Johnson and those others whose *élan* is needed, but lost to this generation. They surmounted immediate custom and changed institutions neither by crisis engineering nor by crisis management, but by respecting and utilizing tradition, intellect and wisdom to meet their critical times.

For example, Dr. Johnson accomplished a federal commitment to the support of a private institution without sacrificing the private character and integrity of the institution in 1928 by the careful knowledge and articulation of early American precedents which avoided rather than precipitated a legal and constitutional crisis. In 1935, he diplomatically withstood a battle over the unwillingness of the chairman of the university's Board of Trustees to see Howard grow into an outstanding international scholarly and democratic university rather than remain a small parochial and patriarchal missionary college. The immediate issue was the size and type of library to be constructed. Dr. Johnson simultaneously established unequivocally the academic integrity of the institution as inviolable when in the same year he was attacked and threatened with cutoff of federal funds by a Black Congressman, Arthur W. Mitchell, of Illinois — and some persons within the institution itself — on the questions of academic freedom and communism. In those crises, his leadership quality superordinated any present conception of crisis management. It also established enduring normative standards for institutions of higher learning rather than merely expeditious resolutions of those immediate campus crises.

Dr. Johnson's presidency then, had the following characteristics which are worthy of study and review:

- Thirty-four years in duration.

- A unique combination of both private and public institutional responsibility in stewardship of a federally supported private institution through the economic collapse of the Great Depression, the vitriolic anti-communist and race-baiting witch hunting attacks of the 1930s, and through three periods of major international wars and domestic civil rights struggles.

- The evolution of a respected domestic and international research, legal and community service pattern through scholarly and professional contributions by both faculty and students.

- An outstanding international institutional climate which not only sent faculty scholars to all parts of the world, but which drew to Howard the highest proportion of foreign students of any institution in the nation.

- The insistence that the institution exhibit and actualize its charter function to serve all mankind, in defiance of both custom and expectation that its role should be restricted to that of a small Black college of limited clientele and purpose.

- An image of moral strength, scholarly eloquence and charismatic spiritual inspiration as being essential to the office of president and central to the approach to critical administrative and public institutional decisions.

- A monument to the meaning and essence of academic freedom within the context of institutional and scholarly integrity and responsibility to society.

- An orderly and carefully studied transition of the responsibilities of the presidential office to a distinguished and carefully selected successor by use of a clearly articulated model of criteria for presidential selection and a five year time span for orderly search.

There are distinctive higher education leadership qualities which transcend managerial functions and which are rare to find in present conceptions of leadership. Yet they characterized the lives and distinctive values of the collegiate presidency in an age when survival stakes were much higher for both

institutions and students, when presidents were required to be exceptional scholar-leaders, and when crises were products of real macrocosmic external eventualities rather than self-directed internal and in-group economic and power aggrandizement machinations.

The accomplishments and the normative qualities which marked the leadership of Dr. Johnson provide useful lessons for present and future higher education leaders, theorists, and aspirants. Perhaps the greatest lesson is that he lived through all of those exigencies of time, conflict and institutional growth, retired to another career in service to public education, re-married rather than remain a widower after the death of his first wife, and remained active until the ripe age of 86. At that time he finally laid down both the burdens and the pleasures of his long years of accomplishment in an eternal peace for himself, and left an enduring legacy for the more than 35,000 graduates of his Howard years and for those who will follow in the years to come. His Howard years ended with rites in the Andrew Rankin Chapel on September 14, 1976. □

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*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your
good works, and glorify your Father, who is in heaven.*

Matthew 5:16