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A Timely Message

By Vernon E. Jordan, Jr.

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Howard is home to me. It is my alma mater. This is where I studied the law. Some would say this is where I studied at the law. This is where I expanded my mind, sharpened my skills, and reaffirmed my commitment to social justice.

Right here at Howard is where I drew moral sustenance from the preachings of Mordecai Johnson and Daniel Hill and Evans Crawford. Howard is where I drew spiritual sustenance from Warner Lawson's choir — in my time — and where I drew intellectual sustenance from brilliant minds like James Nabrit, George Johnson, James Washington, Herbert Reid, Dorsey Lane, Newton Pacht.

And after four years as the only Black in my class, and one of five in the student body of 2000 in an all-white institution, it was here at Howard that I found my soul again.

So I'm a proud and loyal son of Howard University.

My feeling for Howard transcends personal experience. Howard is — and has been since its founding—the heart of Black higher education. Generation after generation of Black people have looked to Howard for intellectual vision and as the place where they could gain the skills to build careers and serve the community.

Howard University is a special place, a very special place. It would be easy to call the roll of great names, the outstanding alumni who are familiar to all Americans through their role in public life, in the Supreme Court, in law and medicine, and in other fields.

But as important are the thousands upon thousands of Black young people who passed through these doors to become businessmen, teachers, doctors, accountants, corporate executives. All Black chil-

dren used to be told to be ready for the doors to open. Thanks to Howard and the Black colleges, when the doors opened, we flooded through.

And Howard serves the international community as well as this nation. When American oil executives negotiate for leases on African oil fields, it is likely that a Howard graduate is on the home nation's team.

So Howard is a national and international resource. And for Black Americans, it is the capstone of Black education, the shining beacon of excellence and accomplishment.

But never, never, has Howard been needed more. For Black people, this is a time of trial, a time of hardship, a time when hope turns to despair. Yes, this is a time when the mood of the nation appears to be in the grip of a new negativism that



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preaches a morality of selfishness and "harm thy neighbor."

The Black community today feels itself under siege. It is victimized by the budget cuts, harassed by attacks on affirmative action, alarmed that state legislatures will redistrict our representatives out of the Congress and of local offices. It is outraged by the Administration's tilt toward racist South Africa. We are threatened by a return to the discredited notion of "states' rights."

And we are burdened by events beyond the political arena: by the growing racial insensitivity and rising anti-Black attitudes; by the continued deterioration of Black neighborhoods; by the flow of drugs and the increase of crime; by the rise of the fanatics of the far right like the Klan and the Nazis.

The gains we made in the 1960s were slowed in the 1970s, and now, in the 1980s, we face a massive attack on our basic

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interests. And that attack is spearheaded by an Administration whose policies are clearly hostile to Black interests. It is an Administration that:

- delayed endorsing extension of the Voting Rights Act,
- reversed long-established judicial and administrative positions on desegregating the schools,
- proclaimed its hostility to the concept of affirmative action,
- weakened regulations enforcing the civil rights laws,
- and virtually excluded Black people from key positions at the decision-making levels, even those Black people who were courageous enough to go into Black communities saying "I am for Reagan and Bush."

Above all, it is an Administration that has rammed through deep cuts in the social programs desperately needed by the poor. Just a brief look at some of the key programs that were slashed tells us that our leaders are busy drilling holes in the social safety net for the poor.

Food stamps — cut. Medicaid — cut. Welfare — cut. Legal services — cut. Education aid — cut. Public service jobs — cut.

The affluent got big tax cuts. The Pentagon got a blank check. But the poor got cuts in lifeline programs, cuts in programs that put food on their tables, cuts in programs that provide opportunities and hope. . . .

And if those cuts were not bad enough, the President announced more cuts.

This summer the Congress of the United States became spineless and passed the Administration's program. This time around the Congress of the United States should show some backbone and it should say to Mr. Reagan: thus far and no further. It should reject any measure that takes a single penny from the pockets of the poor and the vulnerable.

Compassion is what is missing today

Those cuts are not a reflection of conservatism. True conservatism seeks to preserve the best of the past. True conservatism seeks to keep what works and improve what can be improved. True conservatism includes compassion. Compassion — that is the key word this Administration has eliminated from its political vocabulary.

Black youth unemployment is now over 50 percent and much higher in center cities. But the Administration wants to spend two billion dollars, not on training and hiring programs, but on more prisons.

The government itself says school lunches are not nourishing enough. But the Administration wants to cut portions and replace vegetables with catsup and save a few pennies per meal. At the same time, it keeps the tax deduction for business

lunches in deluxe restaurants.

Compassion. That is what is missing today. And that lack of compassion is driving poor people to the brink of disaster, stripping them of their rights, their incomes, and their dignity.

Our leaders don't see it that way. They say that cutting spending and taxes will result in prosperity for all. I believe that is a serious misreading of the racial facts of life and the economic facts of life.

Black people have always supported policies of economic growth. We know that we will not get our fair share unless there is more for everyone. And we will not get our fair share just because there is more. For America has managed to push us from the table of prosperity in good times and in bad times.

The President this summer went, as he should have, to speak to the NAACP convention, and in the midst of that speech he quoted John F. Kennedy's speech when he cut taxes during his presidency. The inflation rate was not the same but he cut taxes and in the justification of the cuts President Kennedy said "a rising tide lifts all boats." And so President Reagan, in trying to justify his supply-side economics, said to the NAACP that "a rising tide lifts all boats."

I grew up in Atlanta and there's no water. There's no water around Atlanta. We have a river called the Chattahoochee and it was polluted a long time ago. And so I'm not an expert in sailing and I don't know what to do with this kind of boat and that kind of boat and I don't know what knots to use or even how to say it. I do know this, that a rising tide may lift all boats but a rising tide can only lift those boats in the water, and Black people's boats are in the dry dock of this economy.

Our job is to get our boats out of the dry dock and in the water and then we can agree with the President that "a rising tide lifts all boats."

Now there are second thoughts about the Administration's policies on economic grounds. Massive increases in military spending and deep tax cuts are bound to

fuel inflation and lead to bigger budget deficits. The market is telling us it expects interest rates to stay high. Small business bankruptcies are climbing. Instead of jobs and prosperity we are in for another recession.

As Dean [Wiley A.] Branton would say in a course in the law school, let us for purposes of hypothesis — let us state a hypothetical case. Let us assume that we are indeed on the road to prosperity. Let us assume that the program will work, and new factories will be built and new jobs created.

If I were the student answering Dear Branton I would say, "but it takes time to build a factory. It takes time to create jobs in the private sector."

Therefore, what are poor people supposed to do in the interregnum? What jobs are jobs in 1986 if food stamps are cut in 1981? Why can't the Administration respond to those who ask what they are supposed to do without jobs today, without social programs they need today, without a compassionate government now?

The refusal to answer that question is a sign that the well of compassion has run dry; that our nation's leaders will not respond to the needs and aspirations of America's poor.

For once again, Black people are driven back to develop our resources unaided, in the face of a hostile national climate. But that is nothing new to us. We did it before. We will do it again. Nobody helped us out of rural peonage and oppression. We did it ourselves. Nobody helped us through the Great Depression. We did it ourselves.

We will survive by getting back to basics

We got over before the New Deal and the Great Society. We will get over again. We forced society to change and to pass civil rights laws and social programs in the 1960s. We will do it again. A people that survived slavery, survived oppression, survived racial hatred can survive the hostile

policies of still another callous Administration.

And we will survive by getting back to basics, by recommitting ourselves to the slow, agonizing work of building community strengths and community institutions, including institutions of higher education like Howard University.

We must recommit ourselves to group progress and unite all classes of Black people to struggle together for the common good.

We must recommit ourselves to devising strategies to move this nation forward again, and to participate in the political process so that strategies become realities.

We must recommit ourselves to challenging all of America's institutions, from the White House to the corporations to the churches, challenging them to live up to America's founding ideals of freedom and equality.

And we must recommit ourselves to protesting our condition; to refuse to allow any of our basic concerns to go down without a fight, to protesting every act of racial discrimination wherever it exists.

The recommitment I am calling for is an individual one. It is a challenge to each and every Black person and especially to those of us who have had an opportunity to win an education, to train for a profession, to make it in a world that has left the masses of our Black brothers and sisters behind.

Howard University, its faculty and students, have a special obligation to pursue that commitment. The Howard University community is the elite of the Black community, the source of Black scholarship and Black expertise.

Black people can't afford not to make full use of all of our resources. The white middle class can ignore the white poor. But the Black middle class is barely out of poverty. It shares the bond of blackness with the poorest of the poor. It faces the barriers of discrimination daily, as surely as our poor do.

So you Howard students cannot think that you are here solely to get the skills that

will let you enjoy a good job and a decent income. For you can never be secure in those achievements so long as blackness is a reason for economic deprivation, so long as blackness is an excuse to discriminate.

You are here as students because people sacrificed for you. The very fact of your being here at Howard is the realization of long-held dreams by people who love you and care for you. It is a source of inspiration and pride to all Black people. You cannot let them down by selfishly aping the excesses of a selfish society. Simply by virtue of attending this great institution — Howard University — you take on a debt to all Black people wherever they may be found.

The first payment on that debt is to live up to Howard's tradition of excellence. Whatever course of study you have chosen, be the best. Aim to perform at the outer limits of your capabilities. All Black children are told that to get what white folk have they've got to be better. And that's still true. Whatever you want in life, you will get it, I believe, by working harder, studying harder, and achieving more.

I want to tell you a story. It's a personal story. It starts in the summer of 1953, when I was trying to make a decision between coming to Howard and living in Cook Hall and going to a small all-white institution in the middle of Indiana. And my mother, brave Black woman that she is, wrote me a note and left it on my bed and she said, "Son, we want you to go wherever you want to go but if you went to Howard..." so and so and so. But I chose another route for fear that I could never get out of the Kenyon Grill... the new students don't know about the Kenyon Grill, but anyway...

And so against my better judgment, my mother and my father and my little brother drove me to that little small town in Indiana, and we did everything you do when your parents take you to school. We had tea with the president and we had tea with the professors and tea with the banker who wanted your little ac-

count. And we went to the programs and we did everything that we were supposed to do and came Sunday night when it was time to say goodbye to my mother and my father and my brother and we stood there in front of the college, it was a poignant, sad moment. It was the separation; it was the cutting of the string. And I remember my baby brother Windsor who shook my hand and said good luck and ran off to the car happy that for the first time in 17 years he could sleep in the bed by himself. And my mother hugged me with tears in her eyes as she whispered in my ear "God bless you son" and eased \$50 in my pocket.

But my father looked at me straight in the eye and all of the creases of his hard work were in his face — he got his bachelor's degree from the university of adversity and a graduate degree from the university of survival — and he said to me, "Boy, you can't come home." And I said, "What you mean I can't come home?" He said, "You can't come home." He said, "The counselor told me that your reading score showed that you are reading less than 200 words a minute and that your white classmates are reading between 1800 and 2000 words a minute, which means that when you're reading history of civilization your classmates will be in chapter eight and you will be struggling to get out of the preface." But he said, "You can't come home."

He said, "These white children around here went to these fine township high schools in Indiana, Illinois and Ohio and they went to prep schools in the East and they got good education and you went to that old dilapidated, segregated, overcrowded, double session, ill-equipped David D. Howard High School in Atlanta where the chemistry lab only had one Bunsen burner and it only worked on Thursday." But he said, "You can't come home. When you were in the 11th grade in 1951," he said, "you used a plane geometry book that had been used by a white student in 1935, the year that you were born, but you can't come home."

And so I said, "Well what am I supposed to do Daddy?" And he looked at me straight in the face—and I can see him now — and said, "Read boy." He said "read." He said, "When your buddies are drinking whiskey with the fraternity under the second covered bridge, you read." He said, "When the boys are taking the girls on blanket parties with flashlights and radios in Rowan Park, you read, boy." (Those of you who know anything about my time at Howard, that was a hell of a thing.) He said, "Whatever is going on extracurricular or otherwise, you read 'cause you cannot afford not to read." And so I took remedial reading three semesters. I took the remedial course in remedial reading.

But four years later on a bright June Sunday afternoon 350 graduates were robed in caps and gowns, and sitting up there in panoramic view of white faces were three black spots. And when they called my name I saw my momma stand up and say "That's mine." And when it was all over and we were saying goodbye to classmates and faculty members and members of the administration, here comes my family. My brother slowly walked up unhappy that he'd have to move over and we'd have to share the bed. My momma came up to me with tears in her eyes again and hugged me and she said "God bless you son." But this time she gave me \$100. But my father, as serious as he was in front of this college four years ago, walked up to me and shook my hand, looked me straight in the face and said, "Boy, you can come home now."

I simply say to students that your mothers and fathers are out there working hard to be able to say to you in four years, three years from now, two years, one year, you can come home again.

So this is a time to nurture Black excellence. The Black community, I believe, cannot be served by the second rate, the jive artists, or the prisoners of routine. It may be fashionable to mock traditional values, to underrate hard work, and to seek

excuses for failure. But that's a fashion that undermines your own dreams and the hopes of all Black people.

You must remember that the opportunity of getting a quality education at Howard also means the opportunity to display the leadership Black people expect from you.

Today's racial, economic and political issues are complex. Black people need unity of purpose, but also, a diversity of strategies and leadership. And you, Howard students, must take your place in that panorama of leadership.

There is a lot of confusion about the role of Black leadership today. Some people still think a Black Moses will arise and lead us to the promised land. They don't understand that one leader or even a handful of leaders cannot move the hard rock of racism without dedicated followers and strong allies.

Sacrifice and struggle have been the road Black people have always taken

The failure to achieve victories over racism is an indictment of white leadership, not Black leadership.

It is white leadership whose hands are on the levers of our society. It is white leadership who control the vast resources of the world's richest nation. It is white leadership that has failed to bring its followers along the road laid out by a Bible that says, "Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream," and a Constitution that says equal protection under the law belongs to everybody. It is white leadership that controls a three-trillion-dollar economy and a 700-billion dollar federal budget. And it is white leadership that brutally cuts poor people's programs to get the money to build MX missiles.

It is the failure of white leadership that puts our nation's economy in peril and endangers its moral standing. It is the failure of white leadership that makes it imperative for Black people to make our needs heard, to fight for our rights, and to keep our cause before an uncaring nation.

And it is the failure of white leadership

that makes it necessary to expand the ranks of Black leaders, to develop national and local leadership in depth to fully reflect the diversity of the Black community as well as its unity of concerns.

It is that failure of white leadership, too, that demands from Black students the leadership they helped give in the turbulent 1950s and 1960s.

In the tough, mean days of the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was Black students who led the war on segregation. In the hopeful days of the mid-1960s, it was Black students who were in the front lines, raising the issues, manning the barricades, and joining the struggles of the community for freedom and justice.

Now, in the bitter 1980s, we look again to our Black students and our Black colleges for a renewed moral fervor, a renewed commitment to those trapped by poverty and despair, a renewed thrust of leadership. We again look to our young, educated people for enlightened militance to protect and reserve Black people's rightful place in our society.

Many of you students were not even born when the students of the fifties began their sit-ins. Most of you were children when Black students in the sixties went into the meanest crevices of the rural South to register Black voters.

But what you have today and what you hope to have tomorrow are the results of their efforts. Now it is your turn. Now Black people are looking to you.

The issues are different. The situation is different. We've learned a lot since the days when innocence encountered entrenched power and won. We've learned from bitter experience that what was won can be lost; what was given can be taken away.

And we've learned from past mistakes. We've learned that narrow nationalism is a dead end in a society that is 90 percent white. We've learned that there are no utopian solutions, no foreign models we can copy. We've learned not to trust ideologies and ideologues. We've learned that today's friends can become tomorrow's enemies.

We've learned a lot, yes we have. But

we've also learned and our history teaches us that we can reach our goals in the face of massive odds. We've learned that the Black thirst for equality cannot be quenched by opposition from goons in white sheets or bigots in three-piece suits.

And we've learned that today's battleground is economic and political. We've learned that we need economists and thinkers to analyze our society and come up with rational answers to our problems. We've learned that maximizing our vote maximizes our power.

Above all, we've learned that if you are Black in America you are in trouble — that you must sacrifice and struggle — for yourselves, for your fellow Black Americans, and for future generations of Black people who will reap the victories of your battles as you reap the rewards won by those who preceded you.

Sacrifice and struggle have been the road Black people have always taken. We are still on that hard road and let us glory in it as our predecessors did. Let us remember that Frederick Douglass taught us that in the middle of a struggle, the only reward is to be *in* the struggle.

Let us remember Harriet Tubman's words: "I never ran this underground railroad off the track and I never lost a passenger." Let's remember Mary Bethune's example and bequest of self-reliance and self-determination. Let us remember that Booker Washington said that "No man who had the privilege of rendering service to his fellows ever makes a sacrifice."

Let us remember that [W.E.B.] DuBois said that Black people demand equality — political, industrial, and social equality — and we will never rest satisfied with anything less.

Let us remember that we stand in a proud tradition of struggle and sacrifice for the greater good; that the baton of leadership is passing to your hands and to the hands of a new generation of Black fighters, and that we together face the future with confidence, unmoved, unbowed, unafraid. And let us remember as we sacrifice, as we struggle, as we march...

*We are soldiers in the army,
We have to fight although we have to cry
We have to hold up the blood-stained
banner
We have to hold it up until we die.*

May we as Black people neither stumble or falter but rather let us mount up with wings as eagles, let us run and not be weary, let us walk together ... and not faint. □

The above was excerpted from Vernon Jordan's Convocation address, September 25, 1981.