New Directions

Volume 9 | Issue 4 Article 3

7-1-1982

Ed Bradley's Message To the '82 Graduates

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For all of you—the graduates—this is a day that marks another rite of passage in your lives . . . a day on which you should justifiably be proud . . . whether you finished at the top of the academic rolls or at the bottom . . . you did finish.

Some of you made better use of these years than others and for that you are to be commended. For those who didn't put them to best use, one can only hope the price you pay down the line isn't too dear. This day puts a period at the end of a chapter in your lives . . . and it marks the start of a new beginning.

These years at Howard have been remarkably carefree. Now, I know that many of you have had to work—and work hard—to get through college, but you have been working to earn a degree that hopefully will serve you well in this new chapter you are about to begin. Your next phase of work is for survival in a world that is not as comfortable as that you have known in these years at Howard.

So, as you sit here today, you might look to the past and count your blessings for having reached this point. At the same time, you might be happy that you are finishing your Howard years and not beginning them because for those who follow in your footsteps—the future is bleak.

Almost 90 percent of all Blacks pursuing post-secondary education receive some form of government-sponsored financial aid. But now the [Reagan] administration has proposed the elimination of three major financial aid programs which, at present, benefit well over a million students with 633-million dollars in assistance. There are other programs which currently provide over five-billion dollars. For those, the administration is seeking to restrict eligibility. That, of course, would reduce the dollar amount of aid and the number of students receiving that aid.

In late March, President [Ronald] Reagan said, "There is some concern" in the Black community about his programs. He added: "If I believed some of the things I've heard and read about this administration's programs, I'd be concerned, too."

Well, there are concerns. Legitimate concerns. There is one estimate that half the private Black colleges in this country will have to close, if all of the proposals made by the President are effected.

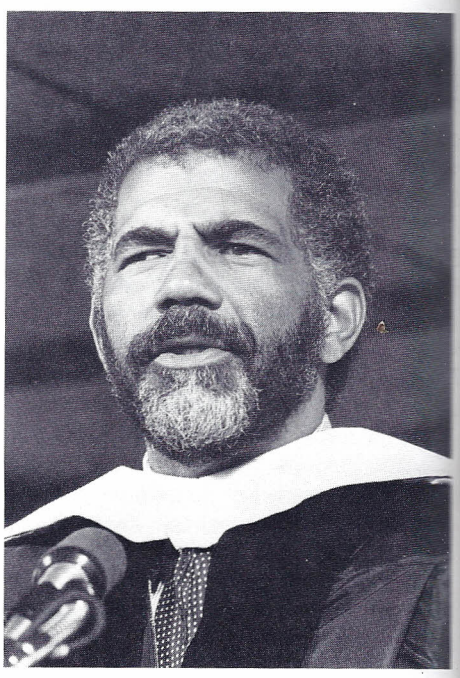
So, there are legitimate concerns among Blacks and not just you college graduates. . . .

And when you consider the all too often desperate condition of life for many people—and the projections for the future—it's easy to understand why.

Back in 1961, in a speech here at Howard, then Vice-President Lyndon Johnson promised a federal commitment to the fundamental belief that before the law all stand equal and are entitled to their full constitutional rights regardless of race, creed, color or section of birth.

Johnson told the 1961 graduates that they were not entering a nation of perfection, but a nation that is striving for protection and a nation in which the national conscience is on the side of morality, justice and right.

He went on to say that what really counts is whether we live in a system that seeks to perpetuate injustice and unfairness or a system which seeks to eliminate these evil sores from the body politic.



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Some years ago, classroom civics books taught us that this great country was a melting pot; that it was a nation of people from many parts of the globe who came together as one. We all know better. If anything, ours is a collection of stereotypes—or more accurately—people trying to overcome stereotypes.

Lyndon Johnson came back to Howard as President of the United States. He told the 1965 graduates that in too many ways Blacks in America have been another nation: deprived of freedom, crippled by hatred, the doors of opportunity closed to hope.

Remarking on the Voting Rights Bill which he would soon sign, President Johnson quoted Winston Churchill's comments on another freedom— ". . . it is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But, it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning." Watching the current debate on an extension of the Voting Rights Bill—apparently—the end of the beginning continues. . . .

You are leaving Howard to join what—in the last 20 years has been a great and growing minority, the Black middle class. The statistics are impressive. The income gap between white and Black has narrowed significantly. But keep in mind these figures:

In 1930, the unemployment rate for Blacks and whites was about the same. Today, the unemployment rate for Blacks is twice that of whites. In 1965, Black teenage unemployment was 23 percent. Today, 45 percent of Black teenagers are unemployed.

So, for the large majority of Black Americans, the picture is still grim. They are still the poor, still the unemployed, still the dispossessed. Despite the court orders, the laws, the victories and the speeches, for them the gulf is widening . . . and the doors of opportunity are still closed to hope.

Keep in mind that you, too, are but a step away. And, that small step is in part provided by the degree you have earned in these difficult times.

Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois noted your problem in his commencement address in 1930. The times have changed, but the problem is the same.

Looking back at the turn of the century, the immediate and pressing question was the education of a vast group of children of former slaves. There had arisen in the South a Joseph, who knew not Pharoh—a Black man who was not born in slavery.

What was he to become?

His fathers were slaves, for the most part, ignorant and poverty-stricken; emancipated in the main without land, tools, or capital . . . The sport of war, the despair of economists.

Today, we are generations removed from those times, but the problems remain. Too many are undereducated, miseducated, or not educated at all . . . slaves still, in a system based on knowledge and education. And then it is their responsibility to raise their own families without the understanding that each of you should have.

The problem as Du Bois saw it then was this: The Black is mainly the unskilled laborer; the man hired last and fired first; the man who must subsist upon the lowest wage and, consequently, share an undue burden of poverty, crime, insanity and ignorance.

It has been more than 50 years since Dr. Du Bois said that to Howard graduates. It was the same when the Kerner Commission issued its landmark report in 1968. How much our times have changed since then. And how remarkable that the condition of life for many is still the same today as it was then!

My hope for you is that your life be better. That, through your efforts in this next chapter of your life, you can make a difference . . . not just for yourselves, but for those less fortunate as well. If I leave you with but one thought, let it be this: *you control your life*. You are the prime factor.

There will be no Moses to lead you to the promised land. At least not on this earth. If you are to find your way there—to the promised land of equality of opportunity, to the promised land that offers your full constitutional rights—you must chart your own course. You must fight and scratch every inch of the way.

Today, we are fighting to hold on to guarantees forged on the anvil of the civil rights struggles of the '50s and '60s. And you should all know that that period was not the *first struggle* for civil rights. Given the history of mankind and the history of this nation, it won't be the last great struggle, either.

You leave Howard blessed with the fruits of your labor. Your years at Howard have prepared you for the combat you will face for the rest of your life. And, believe me, it is a combat. Sometines, each day will seem like a war for survival. But you are well-equipped to carry the torch of this generation. You will be the new leaders. You are the future. You are the latest edition of the *last best hope*. Don't fail us.

In closing, I would like to paraphrase some of the words of Dr. Du Bois who, the night before his speech, saw the zeppelin sailing silver across the new moon. It was new in those days—the zeppelin—you probably know it as the Goodyear blimp.

To Dr. Du Bois in 1930, it was brilliant and enormous. It symbolized the civilization over which it hung. It rode serene above miles of death; like a needle, it threaded together clouds and seas, stars and continents. Within its womb were caged eternal and palpitating forces of the universe, and yet, without quiver, it faced the utter ends of space. Across the skies, it flew, mute—dominant—magnificent—imponderable—it flew.

And what it did, men and women of Howard, you too may do—*you must do or die*.

It is neither miracle nor stroke of genius. It is unremittent toil—and experiment—and thought—and infinite adaptation in the face of every discouragement and failure, in the face of death itself.

Your life is yours. Don't fail. □