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Undoing the Yoke of Bondage in America

By James E. Cheek

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It has now been 11 years since I arrived on this campus to assume the responsibility as your president.

Neither you nor I, in the summer of 1969, knew exactly what to expect of each other. There existed some understandable apprehension, suspicion and uncertainty.

Many of you — I have learned — were told that my wardrobe consisted only of *dashikis*, that I carried an African walking stick carved from ebony wood in the form of a python.

I — on the other hand — was told by word of mouth, in letters and in telegrams that the students were unreasonable and uncontrollably destructive, and that the faculty on the whole was uncooperative, intractable, reactionary and stubborn.

We discovered, upon my arrival and during the first subsequent weeks, that these caricatures were false and baseless.

Our past 11 years together, however, have not constituted that idyllic marriage "made in heaven." But through more than a decade, we have been able to work together in discharging a common mission and in pursuit of a common purpose.

When I was officially inaugurated in April of 1970, I was inaugurated as the 15th president of Howard University. It was not until a short time ago that I was to discover that rather than being the 15th president, I am in fact the 13th.

Mordecai Johnson, reflecting on the years of his presidency, had the nagging thought that somehow the trials and tribulations of his administration had something to do with the fact that he was inaugurated the 13th president.

With the discovery that I, not he, am

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the 13th, Howard has managed to have two men as president who rightly deserved — by virtue of the number 13 — to have little peace of mind, few moments of tranquility, large doses of turbulence, and a constituency whose interests are so mutually exclusive as to make this job almost impossible.

But this is not to utter a complaint, for I should not wish to head a university that is a placid place.

I do express the hope, however, inasmuch as we undertake the work of this university in the 113th year of its existence, that we do so with a firm resolve that this university — despite the number 13 — will not be crippled by forces from within nor deterred by forces from without in pursuit of its mission and its purpose.

We are in a period of grave peril to our nation's destiny. Despite the gravity of the international condition in which our nation is inevitably caught up, it is not the state of our foreign affairs that I now have in mind. It is rather the gravity of our domestic affairs, and those affairs as they specifically relate to the status and condition of Black Americans and all other dispossessed and oppressed minorities.

While this nation cannot escape playing a major role in the shaping of events on the international scene, its ability to contribute positively and honorably to resolving the differences among nations will be greatly determined by its ability and its willingness to resolve with honor, with morality and with nobility, the disparities, the injustices and the differences among its own people on its own shores.

For it has long been my conviction that until America comes fully to grip with its most historic, endemic and pervasive characteristic at home, it will be incapable of coming to grip with the major problems abroad.

The historic, endemic and pervasive characteristic to which I refer is "institutionalized racism."

It has been, and remains the case, that institutionalized racism, manifested in many forms and exemplified in all areas of our national life — economic, social, cultural, political and educational — is a cancer which is destroying our ability to be a moral force in the affairs of mankind.

Near the beginning of this century, W.E.B. Du Bois was to write that the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the "color line." That was 77 years ago. The issue of race that Du Bois perceived as a "problem," was perceived by [Gunnar] Myrdal in the 1940s as a "dilemma," and by the Kerner Commission in the 1960s, as a "crisis." Many of us are now beginning to perceive this issue, for our nation's present and its future, as a *catastrophe*.

During the 1950s, we achieved a victory in the courts in having laws sanctioning discrimination on the basis of race struck down.

During the 1960s, through our acts of civil disobedience such as sitting-in, standing-in, praying-in, and because of the legislation of the Congress, we achieved further victories in public ac-

commodations, in destroying disfranchisement, in exercising our right to vote, and in numerous other areas where there appeared to be a national moral commitment to eliminating the disparities and inequities between the races.

We embarked, also, upon a program of eradicating poverty and to the building of a society in which there would exist no barriers to the development and preservation of an abundant life, to the making of true liberty and in making fundamental the pursuit of real happiness.

As the decade of the 1960s gave way to the dawning of the 1970s, ominous signs began to appear. And as we lived through the 1970s, we discovered that much of our nation's transformation that we thought was fundamental was, in reality, simply superficial. We discovered that voices and organizations and institutions which had supported our cause in the movement for civil rights became silent or adversaries in the emergence of our struggle for social justice.

"Benign neglect," which had become the theme setting the mood for the 1970s, had by the middle of that decade evolved into a practice of *malignant neglect*.

I need not take the time to elaborate on all the factors and the characteristics of our national behavior that indicate a changing mood, an eroding commitment, more promise than fulfillment, a mania that has been described as being mean and ugly — or as the Urban League notes, "the new negativism."

I confine myself to one aspect of our national life which for more than a century has been a foundation stone upon which the hopes, aspirations and the dreams of our people have been erected. That foundation stone is the network of Black colleges and universities.

Institutions serving primarily Black Americans were created in response to America's racism — a racism so

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thoroughly entrenched in the nation's mentality and so deeply engraved in the national social consciousness that it could be summed up in the words of Chief Justice [Roger] Taney of the United States Supreme Court, in the *Dred Scott* decision, "that the negro is so far inferior that he has no rights that a white man is bound to respect."

Although more than 100 years have passed since these words were uttered from the highest court in the land, the concept they embody has lingered on and continues to mold and shape the contour and character of American economic, social, political, cultural and educational life for the almost 30 million Black people who are citizens of this country.

During the institution of slavery, and shortly after its abolition, the Black colleges and universities were created to provide, through education, the development of leadership and equality to serve as instruments for the liberation of a people subjected to a "bondage of the flesh" as well as to a "bondage of the spirit."

But our institutions were also founded to assist — indeed to force — this nation to act on its own declaration by living

under God, by remaining indivisible and by preserving liberty and justice for all of its people.

Never adequately funded and never enthusiastically supported, always cast to the outerfringes of the hinterlands of American higher education, these institutions have discharged their Herculean responsibilities and pursued their defying multiple mission with determination, with devotion, with compassion and with courage.

Like "trees planted in the rivers of waters," our Black institutions, in the past, could not and would not be moved. And neither the lack of adequate finances nor the absence of a broadscale public advocacy or the indifference of their own alumni would deter them from their appointed tasks. Like the Rock of Gibraltar, they have been, and remain now, impregnable defenders of our rights, the symbolic and realistic expressions of our culture and identity, and eloquent testimonies to the lie that we are an inherently and genetically inferior people.

For it is from the campuses of these institutions that have emerged our clergymen, our physicians, our dentists, our lawyers, our engineers, our architects, our social workers, our teachers and our scholars.

It defies the imagination to even try and ponder where Black people would be, where America would be today were it not for these colleges and universities.

Some educational experts and social commentators have characterized our Black colleges and universities as the "wastelands" of American higher education.

In what they have done and in what they are, and in what they represent, I consider them to be *oases in America's deserts of oppression*. They have not only educated the vast majority of our people, but they have enriched our Black communities.

I had the good fortune to grow up in a southern city that had two predominantly Black educational institutions, one privately-supported, the other publicly-supported. From the age of 7 to the age of 17 when I left home to attend college, I was privileged to hear and to meet the Black giants of our country. From the pulpit of Peiffer Chapel at Bennett College, and from the stage of Harrison Auditorium at A&T State, I and countless other thousands were exposed to Mary McLeod Bethune, Walter White, Mordecai Johnson, Channing Tobias, Benjamin Mays, John W. Davis, Charles Wesley, Howard Thurman, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, and numerous others. From the lips of these individuals issued forth words and spirit that inspired, that motivated, that energized, that unified and illuminated.

These two colleges, through the voices and the spirits of giant men and women, taught several generations of Black people to be proud of our skin color, to guard and to protect our institutions, to allow no man to despise our race, that our worth as individuals was not to be determined by the color of our skin, the texture of our hair, the shape of our nose or the size of our lips. But rather, our worth was to be measured by the nature of our character, the quality of our deeds and the nobility of our aspirations.

The experience made possible in Greensboro, North Carolina because of two Black colleges, was replicated throughout the southland and elsewhere wherever these kinds of institutions existed.

They sent rays of hope like lightning bolts through our communities that banished fear and lifted despair, created courage and endowed hope. Black people, young and old, educated and uneducated, poor and not so poor, because of these institutions and what they gave, derived the ability — in the face of great adversity — to walk our streets and to live our lives enclosed in our bosom the *radical audacity of faith*.

And now we come face to face squarely with a serious and concerted effort to destroy these resources — the foundation stone of our past, our present and our future — to destroy them by starving them to death, though they have never been well nourished; by merging them with other predominantly white institutions, although they have always

been submerged; by eliminating their racial identity, despite the fact that in America today nothing *loses* its racial identity; things in this country only *change* racial identity.

Those of us who advocate and defend the necessity for the preservation of our institutions have at various times been called "separatists," "racists in reverse," "Black nationalists," and all kinds of other negative expressions. This kind of labeling and definition of our advocacy is intended to obfuscate, to divide us, and to direct our attention from the fundamental

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questions that are inherent in the ongoing debate about the presence of Black people in a racist-dominated society.

As long ago as 1909, Du Bois addressed this question and wrote these words:

"Here then we face the curious paradox and we remember contradicting facts. Unless we fought segregation with determination, our whole race would have been pushed into an ill lighted, unpaved, unsewered ghetto . . . Unless we had built great organizations and manned our own Southern schools and Colleges, we would be shepherdless sheep . . ."

Our institutions were then, and continue to be, the battering rams against the doors of discrimination, deprivation, disprivilege and injustice. Poor in resources but rich in resolve, our colleges have been — and continue to be — the weapons of our peoples' liberation and the instruments of our nation's salvation and redemption.

We come now to the question and the issue of the *capstone*, Howard University.

In the national atmosphere in which we must carry on our work, Howard University — as has occurred so frequently in the past — will be looked upon to provide a haven and a sanctuary; to demonstrate both leadership and vision; to de-

fend with courage and to protect with diligence; to chart a course that will cause our nation to unloosen the yoke of bondage in order that the oppressed go free.

As always, from the time of our founding, in the endeavors in which we have engaged, we had few friends but many adversaries, weak supporters but strong opponents, little understanding but much confusion, few advocates but numerous detractors.

During the years that I have been here, I have come strongly to believe that the mission and purpose of this institution are inextricably bound up with the future of the American nation as a free society. And it is abundantly clear to me that the future of Black people will influence decisively the destiny of this Republic.

It was more than a symbolic act — as [Walter] Dyson reports in his history of Howard — when the Board of Trustees voted unanimously on January 16, 1894, to adopt as the official colors of our university, the colors of the American flag. In so doing, they were in effect giving witness to the conviction that Howard University and the American nation would march hand-in-hand in forging a land where justice would have no tarnish, where opportunity would have no boundaries, where freedom would have no limitations, where equality would have no prescriptions and where fraternity would have no qualifications.

And whatever the founding fathers of our country may have intended in the hallowed language of the Declaration of Independence and in the Preamble to the Constitution, the founding fathers of Howard University were determined to make those words living realities in the lives and conditions of this nation's peoples, no matter what the color of their skin or their ethnic background.

It was for this purpose that this university was founded, and it is to this end that it continues.

To all of us to whom the preservation of this university has been entrusted, there is put the question that was put to the Prophet Jeremiah: "If you have raced with men on foot and they have wearied you, how can you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you have fallen down, how will you do in the jungle of the Jordan?"

Ours is neither the time nor is Howard University the place for those of faint

heart, feeble courage, weak commitment, confused and purposeless ambition or selfish motives.

But this is the time — and Howard University is the place — for men and women who embody in their being, who demonstrate in their every action and who express in their every utterance that they are, in the words of our alma mater, “true and leal and strong and ever bold to battle wrong.”

During the past 11 years, we have devoted our energies and our efforts to strengthening the financial, the physical and the human resources of this institution toward the end that we shall have adequate resources to carry on the task we are obligated to perform.

Those efforts have been directed toward the private sector as well as the federal government. Our work in resource building remains incomplete but will be continued.

No one — who is enlightened — has questioned the appropriateness of Howard University seeking increased financial support from its alumni, from foundations or from corporations.

But now, after an activity and a practice that has been in existence since the institution's founding, and sanctioned by federal law since 1928, questions are being raised about the federal government providing direct financial support for Howard University's academic programs and its physical development. In ways both subtle and not so subtle, in a manner both covert and overt, this question is being manifested in many forms and in several places — in some forums where 10 years ago I would have least expected them to be raised.

First, let me take note of the fact that the federal government for a long number of years has been supporting predominantly white universities directly without anyone seriously raising the question or considering that practice an issue.

Secondly, Howard University has never received and does not even now receive federal support commensurate with its needs or consistent with the intent and objectives of the Congress which authorized such support in 1928.

And thirdly, let everyone understand this — if we understand nothing else — that federal money is not 100 percent white money.

Black people in the United States have a wealth in excess of 100 billion dollars.

We pay income taxes into the federal treasury as all others do. And because our wealth is largely consumer wealth, for a large segment of American industry and commerce, our purchase of goods, products and services provide the margin of different enabling those commercial enterprises to yield a profit on the basis of which they are taxed by the federal government.

This nation achieved its economic supremacy largely on the backs of our Black foreparents. Their sweat, their blood and their tears provided the ferti-

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lizer that was necessary to bring forth in this country an abundant economic harvest.

Let everyone know, that so long as I am here, this university does not intend to cease aggressively to press its case for increased federal support. And this is the last time I am going to try to justify it to anybody.

As we continue to press our case with the federal government, with foundations and corporations, we shall be no less aggressive in the pursuit of our alumni. I have travelled around the country and I have been entertained in the homes of alumni, have ridden in their cars, gone riding on their horses and have consumed their caviar and their wine. I have yet to meet a graduate of this university who can lay a legitimate claim to being poor.

While we continue the effort to bring our resources on a level of parity with other comparable universities, let us be clear among ourselves that the campuses of Howard University are not playgrounds for the indolent who have come leisurely to go through the motions of an education. Our campuses are *battlegrounds* for the serious who seek out this place to confront ignorance with knowledge, where truth grapples hand-

in-hand with falsehood, where understanding comes face-to-face with confusion. Howard University is no resting place and there is no hiding place down here.

Other universities may afford the luxury of graduating students who cannot read or write, but not Howard University.

Some universities, perhaps, can be indifferent about whether their graduates are able to pass professional examinations required to practice their professions, but not Howard University.

Some universities may claim to be neutral, as Harvard does, on the great moral and social issues in our society, but not Howard University.

Some universities can afford to tolerate professors who do not teach though God sent them in the world to teach, or students who refuse diligently to study and learn though God sent them to do so, but not Howard University.

Some universities, perhaps, can be at ease with discourteous staff, sloppy administrative procedures, people who are there to receive a paycheck, but not Howard University.

Our institution is in the business of not only educating but also of liberating, not only of discovering but also of reconstructing. We are alone in the business of undoing the yoke of bondage.

We make no apology for doing what our times and circumstances compel us to do. For the *First Emancipation* was the burden of the white man, and that is why it remained only a proclamation. But the *Second Emancipation* is the burden of the Black man, and that is why it must be made a reality.

If we do not assume this burden, then who will? □

The above, one of James E. Cheek's most frequently quoted speeches, was excerpted from his address at the university's 113th Opening Convocation, September 26, 1980.