

Remarks of President Barack Obama – As Prepared for Delivery

Commencement Address at Morehouse College

Atlanta, Georgia

May 19, 2013

Hello, Morehouse! Thank you Dr. Wilson, the Board of Trustees; Congressman Cedric Richmond and Sanford Bishop – both proud alumni of this school; Congressman Hank Johnson and the great John Lewis; Mayor Reed, and all the members of the Morehouse family. Most of all, congratulations to this distinguished group of Morehouse Men, the Class of 2013! Some of you are graduating summa cum laude, some of you are graduating magna cum laude, and I know some of you are just graduating, “thank you Lordy.”

I see some good looking hats on the moms and grandmas here today. Which is appropriate, since we’re here on Sunday, and folks are in their Sunday best. Congratulations to all of you – the parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, family and friends who supported these young men in so many ways. This is your day, too. Just think about it – your sons and brothers have spent the last four years far from home and close to Spelman. And they still made it here today. So you must be doing something right. Graduates, give them a round of applause.

I know some of you had to wait in long lines to get into today’s ceremony. I would apologize, but it didn’t actually have anything to do with security. These graduates just wanted you to know what it’s like to register for classes. And this time of year brings a different kind of stress, with every senior stopping by Gloster Hall over the past week making sure your name was on the list of students who’ve met all the graduation requirements. If it wasn’t, you had to figure out why. Was it the library book you let your roommate borrow freshman year? Was it Dr. Johnson’s policy class? Did you get enough Crown Forum credits?

I can help with that last one. Today, I am exercising my power as President to declare this speech sufficient Crown Forum credits for any otherwise-eligible student to graduate. Consider it my graduation gift to you.

Graduates, I am humbled to stand here with all of you as an honorary Morehouse Man. And as I do, I'm mindful of an old saying: "You can always tell a Morehouse Man, but you can't tell him much." That makes my task today a little more difficult, I suppose. But I think it also reflects the sense of pride that has always been a part of the Morehouse tradition.

Benjamin Mays, who served as the president of Morehouse for almost 30 years, understood that tradition perhaps better than anyone. He said, "It will not be sufficient for Morehouse College, for any college, for that matter, to produce clever graduates... but rather honest men, men who can be trusted in public and private life – men who are sensitive to the wrongs, the sufferings, and the injustices of society and who are willing to accept responsibility for correcting [those] ills."

It was that mission – not just to educate men, but to cultivate good men – that brought community leaders together just two years after the end of the Civil War. They assembled a list of 37 men, free blacks and freed slaves, who would make up the first prospective class of what later became Morehouse College. Most of those first students had a desire to become teachers and preachers – to better themselves so they could help others do the same.

A century and a half later, times have changed. But the "Morehouse Mystique" endures. Some of you probably came here from communities where everyone looked like you. Others may have come here in search of that kind of community. And I suspect that some of you probably felt a little bit of culture shock the first time you came together as a class in King's Chapel. All of a sudden, you weren't the only high school sports captain or student council president. All of a sudden, among a group of high achievers, you were expected to be something more.

That's the unique sense of purpose that has always infused this place – the conviction that this is a training ground not only for individual success, but for leadership that can change the world.

Dr. King was just 15 years old when he enrolled here at Morehouse. He was an unknown, undersized, unassuming young freshman who lived at home with his parents. I think it's fair to say he wasn't the coolest kid on campus; for the suits he

wore, his classmates called him “Tweed.” But his education at Morehouse helped to forge the intellect, the soul force, the discipline and compassion that would transform America. It was here that he was introduced to the writings of Gandhi, and Thoreau, and the theory of civil disobedience. It was here that professors encouraged him to look past the world as it was and fight for the world as it should be.

And it was here, at Morehouse, as Dr. King later wrote, where “I realized that nobody...was afraid.”

Think about that. For black men in the forties and fifties, the threat of violence, the constant humiliations, large and small, the gnawing doubts born of a Jim Crow culture that told you every day you were somehow inferior, the temptation to shrink from the world, to accept your place, to avoid risks, to be afraid, was necessarily strong. And yet, here, under the tutelage of men like Dr. Mays, young Martin learned to be unafraid. He, in turn, taught others to be unafraid. And over the last 50 years, thanks to the moral force of Dr. King and a Moses generation that overcame their fear, and cynicism, and despair, barriers have come tumbling down, new doors of opportunity have swung open; laws, hearts, and minds have been changed to the point where someone who looks like you can serve as President of the United States.

So the history we share should give you hope. And the future we share should give you hope. You’re graduating into a job market that’s improving. You live in a time when advances in technology and communications puts the world at your fingertips. Your generation is uniquely poised for success unlike any before it.

That doesn’t mean we don’t have more work to do together. Because if we’re being honest with ourselves, too few of our brothers and sisters have the opportunities you’ve had here at Morehouse. In troubled neighborhoods all across the country – many of them heavily African-American – too few of our citizens have role models to guide them. Communities just a couple miles from my house in Chicago. Communities just a couple miles from here. They’re places where jobs are still too scarce and wages are still too low; where schools are underfunded and violence is pervasive; where too many of our men spend their youth not behind a desk in a classroom, but hanging out on the streets or brooding behind bars.

My job, as President, is to advocate for policies that generate more opportunity for

everybody – policies that strengthen the middle class and give more people the chance to climb their way into the middle class. Policies that create more good jobs and alleviate poverty, that educate more children, that give more families the security of health care, and protect more of our children from the horrors of gun violence. These are matters of public policy, and it is important for all of us, black, white and brown, to advocate for an America where everybody has a fair shot in life.

But along with collective responsibilities, we have individual responsibilities. There are some things, as black men, we can only do for ourselves. There are some things, as Morehouse Men, that you are obliged to do for those still left behind. As graduates – as Morehouse Men – you now wield something even more powerful than the diploma you are about to collect. And that’s the power of your example.

So what I ask of you today is the same thing I ask of every graduating class I address: use that power for something larger than yourself.

Live up to President Mays’ challenge. Be “sensitive to the wrongs, the sufferings, and the injustices of society.” And be “willing to accept responsibility for correcting [those] ills.”

I know some of you came to Morehouse from communities where life was about keeping your head down and looking out for yourself. Maybe you feel like you escaped, and you can take your degree, get a fancy job and never look back. And don’t get me wrong – with the heavy weight of student loans, with doors open to you that your parents and grandparents could scarcely imagine, no one expects you to take a vow of poverty. But I will say it betrays a poverty of ambition if all you think about is what goods you can buy instead of what good you can do. So yes, go get that law degree. But ask yourself if the only option is to defend the rich and powerful, or if you can also find time to defend the powerless. Yes, go get your MBA, or start that business. But ask yourself what broader purpose your business might serve, in putting people to work, or transforming a neighborhood. The most successful CEOs I know didn’t start out intent on making money – rather, they had a vision of how their product or service would change things, and the money followed.

Some of you may be headed to medical school to become doctors. But make sure you heal folks in underserved communities who really need it, too. For generations, certain

groups in our country – especially African-Americans – have been in desperate need of access to quality, affordable health care. And as a society, we are finally beginning to change that. Those of you who are under the age of 26 already have the option to stay on your parents' health care plan. But all of you are heading out into an economy where many young people expect to not only have multiple jobs, but multiple careers. So starting October 1st, you'll be able to shop for a quality, affordable plan that's yours and that travels with you – a plan that will insure not only your health, but your dreams if you have an accident or get sick. That's good for you, it's good for this country, and you should spread the word to your fellow young people.

And that brings me to my second request of you: Just as Morehouse has taught you to expect more of yourself, inspire those who look up to you to expect more of themselves.

We know that too many young men in our community continue to make bad choices. Growing up, I made a few myself. And I have to confess, sometimes I wrote off my own failings as just another example of the world trying to keep a black man down. But one of the things you've learned over the last four years is that there's no longer any room for excuses. I understand that there's a common fraternity creed here at Morehouse: "excuses are tools of the incompetent, used to build bridges to nowhere and monuments of nothingness." We've got no time for excuses – not because the bitter legacies of slavery and segregation have vanished entirely; they haven't. Not because racism and discrimination no longer exist; that's still out there. It's just that in today's hyperconnected, hypercompetitive world, with a billion young people from China and India and Brazil entering the global workforce alongside you, nobody is going to give you anything you haven't earned. And whatever hardships you may experience because of your race, they pale in comparison to the hardships previous generations endured – and overcame.

You now hail from a lineage and legacy of immeasurably strong men – men who bore tremendous burdens and still laid the stones for the path on which we now walk. You wear the mantle of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, Ralph Bunche and Langston Hughes, George Washington Carver and Ralph Abernathy, Thurgood Marshall and yes, Dr. King. These men were many things to many people. They knew full well the role that racism played in their lives. But when it came to their own accomplishments and sense of purpose, they had no time for excuses.

I'm sure every one of you has a grandma, an uncle, or a parent who's told you at some

point in life that, as an African-American, you have to work twice as hard as anyone else if you want to get by. I think President Mays put it even better: “Whatever you do, strive to do it so well that no man living and no man dead, and no man yet to be born can do it any better.” I promise you, what was needed in Dr. Mays’ time, that spirit of excellence, and hard work, and dedication, is needed now more than ever. If you think you can get over in this economy, just because you have a Morehouse degree, you are in for a rude awakening. But if you stay hungry, keep hustling, keep on your grind and get other folks to do the same – nobody can stop you.

And when I talk about pursuing excellence, and setting an example, I’m not just talking about in your career. One of today’s graduates, Frederick Anderson, started his college career in Ohio, only to find out that his high school sweetheart back in Georgia was pregnant. So he enrolled in Morehouse to be closer to her. Pretty soon, helping raise a newborn and working night shifts became too much, so he started taking business classes at a technical college instead – doing everything from delivering newspapers to buffing hospital floors to support his family. Then he enrolled at Morehouse a second time – but even with a job, he couldn’t keep up with the cost of tuition. So after getting his degree from that technical school, the father of three decided to come back to Morehouse for a third time. As Frederick says, “God has a plan for my life, and he’s not done with me yet.”

Today, Frederick is a family man, a working man, and a Morehouse Man. And that’s what I’m asking all of you to do: keep setting an example for what it means to be a man. Be the best husband to your wife, or boyfriend to your partner, or father to your children that you can be. Because nothing is more important.

I was raised by a heroic single mother and wonderful grandparents who made incredible sacrifices for me. And I know there are moms and grandparents here today who did the same thing for all of you. But I still wish I had a father who was not only present, but involved. And so my whole life, I’ve tried to be for Michelle and my girls what my father wasn’t for my mother and me. I’ve tried to be a better husband, a better father, and a better man.

It’s hard work that demands your constant attention, and frequent sacrifice. And Michelle will be the first to tell you that I’m not perfect. Even now, I’m still learning how to be the best husband and father I can be. Because success in everything else is unfulfilling if we fail at family. I know that when I’m on my deathbed someday, I won’t be thinking about any particular legislation I passed, or policy I promoted; I

won't be thinking about the speech I gave, or the Nobel Prize I received. I'll be thinking about a walk I took with my daughters. A lazy afternoon with my wife. Whether I did right by all of them.

Be a good role model and set a good example for that young brother coming up. If you know someone who isn't on point, go back and bring that brother along. The brothers who have been left behind – who haven't had the same opportunities we have – they need to hear from us. We've got to be in the barbershops with them, at church with them, spending time and energy and presence helping pull them up, exposing them to new opportunities, and supporting their dreams. We have to teach them what it means to be a man – to serve your city like Maynard Jackson; to shape the culture like Spike Lee. Chester Davenport was one of the first people to integrate the University of Georgia law school. When he got there, no one would sit next to him in class. But Chester didn't mind. Later on, he said, "It was the thing for me to do. Someone needed to be the first." Today, Chester is here celebrating his 50<sup>th</sup> reunion. If you've had role models, fathers, brothers like that – thank them today. If you haven't, commit yourself to being that man for someone else.

Finally, as you do these things, do them not just for yourself or for the African-American community. I want you to set your sights higher. At the turn of the last century, W.E.B. DuBois spoke about the "talented tenth" – a class of highly-educated, socially-conscious leaders in the black community.

But it is not just the African-American community that needs you. The country needs you. The world needs you. See, as Morehouse Men, many of you know what it's like to be an outsider; to be marginalized; to feel the sting of discrimination. That's an experience that so many other Americans share. Hispanic Americans know that feeling when someone asks where they come from or tells them to go back. Gay and lesbian Americans feel it when a stranger passes judgment on their parenting skills or the love they share. Muslim Americans feel it when they're stared at with suspicion because of their faith. Any woman who knows the injustice of earning less pay for doing the same work – she sure feels it.

So your experiences give you special insight that today's leaders need. If you tap into that experience, it should endow you with empathy – the understanding of what it's like to walk in somebody else's shoes. It should give you an ability to connect. It should give you a sense of what it means to overcome barriers.

Whatever success I achieved, whatever positions of leadership I've held, have depended less on Ivy League degrees or SAT scores or GPAs, and have instead been due to that sense of empathy and connection – the special obligation I felt, as a black man like you, to help those who needed it most; people who didn't have the opportunities that I had, because but for the grace of God, I might be in their shoes. So it's up to you to widen your circle of your concern – to create greater justice both in your own community, but also across our country. To make sure everyone has a voice; everyone gets a seat at the table; to make sure that everyone – no matter what they look like or where they come from, or who they love – gets a chance to walk through those doors of opportunity if they want it bad enough.

When Leland Shelton was four years old, social services took him away from his mother and put him in the care of his grandparents. By age 14, he was in the foster care system. Three years after that, Leland enrolled in Morehouse. Today he is graduating Phi Beta Kappa on his way to Harvard Law School. And as a member of the National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council, he plans to use his law degree to make sure kids like him don't fall through the cracks. It won't matter what they look like or where they come from, because they'll have someone like Leland – someone who knows what they've been through – in their corner.

That's what we've come to expect from you, Morehouse. A legacy of leaders – not just in our black community, but in our broader American community. To recognize the burdens you carry with you, but resist the temptation to use them as excuses. To transform the way we think about manhood, and set higher standards for yourselves and others. To be successful, but also to understand that each of us has responsibilities not only to ourselves, but to one another, and to future generations.

Men who refuse to be afraid. Members of the class of 2013, you are the heirs to a great legacy. You have within you the same courage; the same strength; the same resolve as the men who came before you.

That's what being a Morehouse Man is all about. That's what being an American is about. Success may not come quickly or easily. But if you strive to do what's right; if you work harder and dream bigger; if you set an example in your own lives and do your part to help meet the challenges of our time, then I am confident that, together, we will continue the never-ending task of perfecting our union.

Congratulations, class of 2013. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.