

The 481st Convocation

Address: "Race, Politics, and the Costs of Compromise"

By Cathy Cohen

June 10 and 11, 2005

To the graduates of 2005, let me say that it is an honor to stand before you representing the distinguished faculty of the University of Chicago at this very important and joyful occasion. I, along with my colleagues, congratulate all of you, your families, and friends on your accomplishment today! I believe that it is crucial at this time of celebration that we not lose sight of the fact that your extraordinary achievement—securing an exceptional education and graduating from one of the best universities in the world—is an achievement that is not available to all who would choose such a goal.

Institutions around the United States spent much of the past year holding forums, debates, and conferences aimed at celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, in which the United States Supreme Court unanimously struck down legal, state-sponsored segregation in public schools across the country.

The *Brown* decision of May 17, 1954, did not spell the end of segregation. It did not even bring about the end of segregation in public schools, as school districts openly and covertly defied the decree, necessitating what is often called the *Brown II* decision of May 31, 1955, when the Supreme Court instructed districts to end segregation "with all deliberate speed." For all of its limitations, however, the *Brown* decision was important because it served as a formal, public marker that Jim Crow segregation, the legal system of racial segregation entrenched in the South and practiced in the North, could and would be successfully challenged.

Thus, the promise of the *Brown* decision was not limited to ending segregation in public schools or merely securing integration. The promise of *Brown* instead rested on the most democratic of aspirations—that all individuals will receive equal education, that all will receive equal opportunity, and that all will be afforded equal respect. The most radical possibilities of *Brown* lay in the country's forced recognition of black people's humanity and their full membership in

the nation. As author and social critic Ralph Ellison wrote in 1954, “[t]he Court has found in our favor and recognized our human psychological complexity and citizenship and another battle of the Civil War has been won.”¹

Brown was but one decision. Other events in the fifties and sixties made this period one of the most important eras in this country’s political history. The Civil Rights movement, the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the continued mobilization of many Americans for the cause of racial equality were thought to signal a significant turn in racial politics, bringing us closer to the fulfillment of democratic promises enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Yet fifty years later, those political victories have been met with serious challenges, questioning such policies’ relevance for today’s society. Those in and out of universities have witnessed, for example, the attacks on programs such as affirmative action. Opponents of these race- and gender-specific policies have argued that forty years into the post-segregation era, we no longer need design nor continue policies meant to address the history of legal discrimination endured by blacks and other marginalized groups for over four centuries.

It was, of course, W. E. B. Du Bois who declared in his canonical text *The Souls of Black Folk* that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” You, Class of 2005, at the beginning of the twenty-first century have inherited a culture in which the potential of a multiracial society has not yet been met and the problem of the color-line remains unresolved. The racial landscape you will encounter is, thankfully, absent the most visceral components of Jim Crow. But it still harbors some of the ideas, practices, and customs that undergird state-sponsored segregation. This is not to deny or minimize the epic advances we have made in the realm of racial politics and racial justice, but to acknowledge that we also face the reality that in far too many places we still live with at least two societies, separate and unequal—disparities which directly threaten our democracy and by extension the promise of *Brown*.

As you no doubt learned at the University of Chicago, the facts do not, as promised, always speak for themselves. Instead they often offer contradictory evidence, providing the basis for

multiple interpretations of the world. Scholars of racial politics have found evidence of just that—namely, that people from different racial and ethnic groups utilize distinct approaches to evaluating politics and progress in this country.

White Americans, the research suggests, tend to emphasize what they believe are individual characteristics when explaining the fate and behavior of themselves and others. They see an open, fair, and much-improved racial society, which they believe allows individuals to advance on their own merit. On the other hand, research shows that African Americans and members of other marginalized racial groups take a more group-centered approach to evaluating racial politics. They most often prioritize structural conditions and shrinking opportunities in their explanations of behaviors and attitudes. For African Americans who routinely live with twice the unemployment rate of white Americans, who continuously confront residential segregation and consequently less-than-adequate public schools, the issue is not merit but opportunity.

Let me be clear: no community operates as a monolith, espousing one set of beliefs and analyzing issues from one point of view. My own scholarship has focused on just such divisions in black communities. However, though such differences exist in communities, when researchers look at the general trends in public opinion we find that individuals from different racial groups view the world in markedly different ways.

For example, recent data revealed that the increase in youth voting in 2004 touted by the media and politicians was largely driven by the increase in voting among Latino and African-American youth. These young voters differed in their candidate of choice based on race, with young African Americans and Latinos most often voting for John Kerry and white youth more often casting a vote for George W. Bush.

Some scholars argue that the increase in voting, independent of the racial divisions, indicates that the promise of *Brown* and of a fully functioning democracy is within our grasp—that we have reached a point in our history where all citizens, regardless of race, are engaged in debate, where they participate so as to ensure that their interests will be protected and represented by the state, and where they believe that the simple act of voting is their responsibility and will have an

impact.

Unfortunately, reality is never so simple, for other trends and policies pose a direct threat not only to the promise of *Brown* but also to the promise of a fully realized democracy in the United States. Researchers note, for example, that our nation has the highest incarceration rate in the world—ten times higher than other Western democracies. We hold over 25 percent of the world's population of incarcerated people in U.S. jails or prisons at a cost of some \$50 billion.² Today, according to data from the U.S. Department of Justice, there are over two million Americans in jail or prison.

One consequence is that nearly one-eighth of African-American males in this country are not allowed to vote because they are incarcerated or have served time for a felony offense. In a number of states, disenfranchisement continues even after prison. We must ask ourselves what policies that strip away from citizens the most basic of democratic resources—the right to vote—mean for the functioning of our democracy? What does it mean for how resources are allocated? What does it mean for the validity of local and national elections? And what does it mean, as Ellison wrote, for the nation's ability to acknowledge—and, I would add, value—the human dignity and citizenship of black and other marginalized groups?

Fifty years after *Brown*, I am reminded of education's potential to help transform the world every time I encounter a group of politically committed undergraduates, every time I interact with graduate students who detail new ways of seeing and understanding the world, and every time a young black child who lives in the neighborhoods west and south of our campus comes to know of the University of Chicago as one of world's great intellectual institutions and not as a policed landscape with seemingly little relevance to his or her life. The promise of *Brown* is made manifest every time that same young child comes to imagine him- or herself sitting where you are or standing where I am today.

You have been privy to one of the most intense and energetic intellectual communities in the world. But I hope during your time here you have also learned that intellect is most powerful when it is mindful of the lives it can change, the people it can empower, and the societies it can

transform. The litigants of *Brown* and the others challenging segregation fifty years ago encountered a country that legally and in practice declared black people and other people of color to be second-class citizens. Even in that context, the litigants of *Brown* spoke boldly with the aim of transforming society, understanding that they were never guaranteed success nor survival but that their progress and the futures of their children could be better secured by action instead of silence.

The prophetic poet Audre Lorde implores us to speak, writing,

When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed. But when we are silent we are still afraid. So it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive.

Class of 2005, please remember that to live fully is to incur risk. And to live connected to others, especially those more marginally positioned in our society, it is necessary to speak and act, risking status, power, and influence. To take such risks is, I believe, the fulfillment of the promise of *Brown*. It is life lived prioritizing the human dignity of all people and in pursuit of a fully realized democracy, even when society's laws and practices tell you differently. So to the Class of 2005, I wish you a life of happiness, success, and risk-taking!

Notes

1. *New York Times*, May 18, 1954.

2. Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Source Book on Criminal Justice Statistics*, 2001, table 2.1.

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