The 488th Convocation
Address: "1965-2006: Your Commencement and Mine, Reflections on a Past and a Possible Future"
By Thomas C. Holt
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Good afternoon! And congratulations! First, let me reassure you: some forty years ago, I was in your shoes, and I remember very well how my classmates waited restlessly for the speeches to end, to receive their degrees, and to get on with the parties that followed. So, I will be mercifully brief. Although graduations are moments of celebration, they are also rites of passage and as such offer mental spaces for reflection, a time for gathering energies and honing perspectives for the road ahead. In this special moment, then, a time in which you find yourselves poised so selfconsciously between a past life and a future one, I offer these reflections on my own life's past and present, in the hope that they may be of some relevance, perhaps not now but at some future moment, as you commence your life's journey. That word "commencement," you will find, has multiple valences.

The occasion of my own graduation some four decades ago was somewhat different from yours. First, it was on a bright, hot summer day in June rather than Chicago's cloudy, cold December. The school from which I received my first degree, Howard University in Washington, D.C., could not claim the prestige and rigor of the University of Chicago, but it had an older and equally proud history, having been founded at the end of the American Civil War to educate the recently freed slaves. And during my years there, during the 1960s, Howard had become something of a northern border outpost for the student cadres of the Civil Rights Movement.[1] Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and other prominent figures of the militant black student movement were my classmates and compatriots.

It was not surprising, then, that it was to Howard that on my graduation day President Lyndon Johnson came to announce a bold new initiative that he thought

would be the fulfillment of the larger goals of the Civil Rights Movement, which was then at something of a crossroads. Having already signed the landmark Civil Rights Act in July 1964 and anticipating that he would soon be signing just weeks later the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Johnson believed that the movement's goal of ensuring legal equality to all American citizens had been substantially achieved. But to his credit, Johnson knew that merely clearing the law books of statutory impediments would not be sufficient to secure a truly just and meaningfully democratic society. America now confronted a new "and more profound stage of the battle for civil rights," he declared, because the achievement of equality of opportunity in principle would not necessarily mean equality of opportunity in fact. "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him to the starting line in a race and then say: 'You are free to compete with all others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." With this striking metaphor—one the youngest child on any playground in America would have understood—Johnson drove home the moral essence of his argument that America should undertake more affirmative action to achieve racial equality. He then proceeded to list policy initiatives in the areas of employment, education, health, and housing that would build a more democratic and just society.[2]

My father and mother had come to witness my graduation, and they beamed with pride not only at their son's accomplishment but also at having witnessed Johnson's historic address. As my father declared later, it was the first and probably the last time he would hear in person an address by a president of the United States. But more importantly, Johnson seemed to speak to him from the heart about how "the dignity of [a] man" could be crushed by what he called "the dark intensity" of a racist hostility "unlike any other prejudice in our society." For a man like my father, reared on a farm in the segregated South, who had served his country in the Pacific Theater during World War II in a brutally segregated army, this speech was truly a dream come true. Or more accurately, as my father declared later, he had never even dared to dream that in his lifetime an American president would give a speech like that, one that recognized the depth of black disadvantage and historic injury, that seemed sensitive to the corrosion of the spirit that comes with the brand of second-class

citizenship, that had some insight into what it really meant to be black in America in the mid-twentieth century.

Although I was very pleased that my parents, especially my father, had been so thoroughly moved by my graduation ceremony, my own feelings that day were very different. In fact, it is with no small measure of embarrassment that I confess to you now that I was decidedly unimpressed with Johnson's speech to my class that day. Indeed, at times I was hardly listening. You see, I along with many others among my classmates had been protesting just months before what we regarded as the government's belated and weak response to the racist violence in Selma, Alabama, the previous March. But equally important to our mood was the fact that we were already fully engaged in challenging America's deepening involvement—under President Johnson's direction—in the Vietnam War. (The massive mobilizations against the war wouldn't come until two years later, but there had already been isolated protests on Howard's campus since the fall of 1963.)

Johnson's address had not been scheduled until the last moment, so few in the audience had expected to see him at the podium that day and there had been no time to organize demonstrations. A few of the graduates, however, including me, decided we must stage our own silent protest. So with antiwar signs pinned to our backs, we rose when Johnson began to speak and turned our backs (and signs) to him. And, so it was that I actually missed what was arguably the most important policy announcement on race relations by a sitting American president in my lifetime.

Now, I confess this not so much in regret of the disrespect we showed the president that day—perhaps more such "disrespect," earlier on, might have somehow slowed Johnson's headlong rush into what was, as soon became clear, a wrongheaded and tragically wasteful war. As our recent history so clearly shows, "disrespect," speaking truth to power, is something American citizens need to do more of, not less.

No, my little confession here has more to do with the ironies embedded in that story—the unknown and unknowable of the life course I commenced that day, the warm blush of nostalgia about a self so hopeful and yet so naïve, the poignant pangs of regret about hopes still unrealized, the nervous uncertainty about a still open-ended present. So, it is not certainties that I seek to leave with you today, not banal, sound-bite size lessons from the past, but a sense of life's curveballs that come zooming in from the corners of one's peripheral vision and thus the steely poise, the finely balanced judgment, the deep resolve it will demand of you. Once more, let us reflect for just a moment on "commencements" and "ends."

We—the president, my father, and I—commenced decidedly different journeys that day. His brave words notwithstanding, Johnson soon found himself sinking into domestic and foreign policy quagmires that ultimately curtailed and diminished his presidency. The speech at Howard, ironically, was coauthored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an undersecretary of labor, and in that speech were embedded harbingers of his controversial report[3] released later that summer, which argued that equalizing opportunity would require the reformation of the black family. The heated arguments over that proposal would undermine serious debate about other social policy initiatives for some time to come. Far more important and detrimental to Johnson's ambitious goals, however, was the dramatic escalation of the war, which had begun with the landing of American combat forces the previous March (the same month as the Selma marches and the completion of Moynihan's report, ironically) and would be ratcheted up from tens to hundreds of thousands by the Pentagon the following November. The government's ability to fund any social program was effectively sabotaged and the seeds of future tensions were sowed that would divide Americans into warring camps for a generation.

My father would not see another president in the flesh, but he lived through five more presidential administrations. Never again, however, would he feel as hopeful

about America's racial progress as he had that day, never again would he have reason to take pride from a president's words.

After graduation I went South to work awhile in the Civil Rights Movement, then to work (for pay this time) in Johnson's AntiPoverty Program, and finally to work on a doctoral degree, looking now to history for the roots of the puzzles of racism and poverty I had encountered—never guessing that this would turn out to be a life's work.

Just what commenced on that sunny afternoon in June forty-one years ago—a journey toward a bright future or toward a disappointing end? Certainly there is evidence to support the latter impression. Just this week arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court have prompted speculation that the Brown decision itself will be fatally weakened by the end of the current term, all in the name of fostering a putatively color-blind society. For some time now, America's responsibility to act affirmatively to achieve racial parity has been held in disrepute, the subject of disdainful commentary in media, and weakly defended by its supposed friends. Today the federal government openly campaigns against this stepchild of the Great Society. Meanwhile, the threat of lawsuits by rightwing groups—bearing oxymoronic names of truly breathtaking audacity, like "Civil Rights Initiative"—have so cowed many of our institutions of higher education that they often abandon the fight before a shot is even fired. Working from an intellectual posture like that Justice John Marshall Harlan so roundly condemned in his dissent from the Civil Rights Cases in 1883, one in which the constitution's "substance and spirit" is "sacrificed by a subtle and ingenious verbal criticism,"[4]such groups—the negationists who are content to tear down but not build a just society—sometimes seem on the verge of winning this struggle. Indeed, perhaps the only place affirmative action remains unapologetically in full force today is in the United States Army. And thus the profoundest irony of our time: the Department of Defense as the largest "equal opportunity employer" in America.

At moments like this, one can better appreciate, perhaps, the conflicted sentiments of Frederick Douglass as he stood just a few hundred yards from where I stand now, on the Midway over there, addressing a crowd at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. A former slave and abolitionist leader, Douglass—in the final years of his life, witnessed the onset of Jim Crow and a fanatical wave of racial lynching—and it broke his heart. His vision and determination remained clear, however: the so-called "Negro Problem" is misnamed, he roared to the crowd that day on the Midway, simply try justice and the problem is solved.[5]

I am very conscious at this moment that you in my audience are drawn from among the most privileged Americans. From among these graduates will come people who might someday advise a president, sit on a district or circuit court bench, perhaps even be the president or sit with the highest court in the land. In any case, all of you will be citizens, meeting in community and professional groups, voting, deciding thereby our common fate. Whether holding office, or deciding who will hold office, I ask you to remember my father's awed pride that a president of the United States would speak from the heart, from the depth of his experience, about fostering genuine fairness, of justice made palpable and real. Remember Lyndon Johnson and my father, two southerners who knew the lived experience of deprivation firsthand, the one destined to be the most powerful man on earth, the other a simple man who never finished high school, but who for a brief, luminous moment shared a vision of what "freedom and justice for all" must mean, must be. As you commence your own life's journey this day, remember Douglass. Simply try justice, he said, and the problem is solved.

Notes

1. Of course, Howard University's Law School had long been a virtual second headquarters for the legal challenges to segregation, which had received crucial support from its law faculty since the 1930s.
2. See full text in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 125–32

3. Although completed in March, the report was not released until August. “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965, reprinted in Rainwater and Yancey, *ibid,* pp. 39-124.
4. See Charles A. Lofton, *The Plessy Case: A Legal-Historical Interpretation* (New York, 1987), p. 74.
5. Douglass was quoting Kansas Senator John James Ingalls: “Let the nation try justice and the problem will be solved.” The printed version of the earlier speech, “Why is the Negro Lynched?” is quoted in *The life and Writings of Frederick Douglass,* edited by Philip S. Foner, 4 vols. (New York, 1955), 4:521.

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