

New Directions

Volume 14 | Issue 1

Article 4

1-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Cheek, James E. (1987) "The Continuing Struggle: How Will We Do, What Shall We Be?," *New Directions*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol14/iss1/4>

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How Will We Do, What Shall We Be?

By James E. Cheek

Seventeen years . . . ago you bestowed upon me the highest honor that could be granted to any educational administrator — the privilege and the opportunity to become a part of Howard University as its president and thus to become a member of a distinguished university family. Although the beginning of my tenure as your president had been preceded by six years of rewarding, challenging service as the president of my undergraduate alma mater — Shaw University — these years at Howard have been the most rewarding, the most challenging, exciting and fulfilling years of my adult life.

I owe to the Board of Trustees, to our staff, our students and our alumni a debt of gratitude for providing me those moments that we have shared together as we have labored on behalf of our people in the service of our God and our country.

Here at Howard University our son and our daughter have grown from childhood to adulthood. Howard has touched their lives in a manner and a form that no other institution of higher learning could. My wife and I experienced an emotion indescribable when, on May 12, 1984, our

son Jimmy graduated from Howard with a bachelor of science degree, and we look forward, nervously, to [next] year's Commencement when our daughter Janet is expected — at least by us — to graduate with her bachelor of science degree from Howard. For the second time, Celestine and I will again be visited by that indescribable experience.

We regret that we have no more sons or daughters of our own to entrust to Howard's keeping, but we rejoice in the fact that vicariously we have shared in the Howard experience as students and grasped the true significance and the true meaning of a Howard education through the experience of two young people who will possess — for the rest of their lives — not just a Howard degree but the imprimatur of a Howard education; the Howard ideal, the Howard spirit, the Howard vision, the Howard understanding of the world as it is, but more important, the Howard objective and goal for the world as it ought to be.

We thank the faculty . . . for having shared with us the burdens of parenthood and having made our tasks easier by virtue of the role you have played as men and women of commitment and devotion and loyalty, and great and noble vision.

As I proceed with my 18th year as your president, and as this institution goes forward during its 119th academic year, we do so with a keen awareness of why this university was created, how it has survived and endured, what it is that makes it indispensable in the present, and for what purpose and for whose sake it must be preserved in the future. Those who conceived of this institution in the 1860s and who were responsible for its establishment were possessed of a vision of a center of learning that would not just be the capstone of a limited and

. . . We are unwilling and unable to be passive witnesses to a form of genocide created through the process of attrition.

circumscribed species of institutions, but they conceived of Howard as a cornerstone of our nation's endeavors upon which no limitations were to be placed and no circumscriptions were to be imposed.

They understood clearly the meaning of John Stuart Mill's observation that "education is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery." Our founders also shared the conviction of Epictetus, who in the second century A.D., having been a slave in Athenian society, made also the observation that while man has decided that only free men shall be educated, God has decreed that only the educated shall be truly free.

Here, then, in our nation's capital was established this Howard University, which during the years of its existence has become a very special place. Indeed I would contend that it is a sacred place. For 119 years this institution has remained faithful to its mission: an instrument for the liberation of a people and for the redemption of a nation. Generations of young men and women have come here to participate in the experience of education and have left to serve

at home or abroad, not simply as educated and trained men and women, but as enlightened, inspired and courageous leaders who, by virtue of their experience here, were determined that their gifts and their talents would indeed make a difference in the lives of their fellow man and would have an impact on shaping and reshaping the nature and character of this society as well as the nature and character of the societies and nations around the globe wherever they chose to serve.

From its inception, this institution has been the vanguard of our people's continuing struggle to be completely and totally free and our nation's struggle to become completely and totally just. Those who now believe that Howard's mission and role in our society — and our mission and role in the world — can now be detached from our people's struggle are either misinformed, uninformed, disinterested or uninterested Which ever may be the case, such persons live in a world that does not now exist and a world that may never exist if this institution were to become just another center of higher learning in the American scene. Indeed as this university, in the first half of this century, through its faculty and its students in the School of Law — joined by others from other components of Howard — used scholarship and research to change the character and the social direction of an entire nation in the struggle for civil rights . . . we are compelled to harness the knowledge and the understanding derived from rigorous and serious scholarship and research in the continuing struggle for social justice as we draw near to the close of the 20th century.

Can any person associated with Howard be complacent, apathetic, indifferent and unconcerned when we live in a time when young Black males of college age comprise 48 percent of this nation's prison population, 27 percent of the military, but less than 6 percent of the college and university population? The answer to that question is absolutely not! Are we not capable here of creatively responding to the implications for our people's and our nation's future to the fact that, although the percentage of young Black men and women graduating from high school is increasing, the percentage entering colleges and universities is declining? The answer is yes.

And are we not disturbed and thus motivated to marshal our resources to reverse current trends which indicate that, if allowed to continue, by the year 2,000 — only 13 plus years away — 71 percent of all Black families in this nation will be headed by single women? By that same year, if these present trends continue, [only] 30 percent or less of Black males will be employed.

The response demanded is "yes." We are not only disturbed, but we are also determined to marshal our resources . . . by whatever means at our disposal. We are also determined to sensitize our national leadership to the fact that we are unwilling and unable to be passive witnesses to a form of genocide created through a process of attrition.

When I was inaugurated as your president on April 25, 1970, I chose as the theme of my inaugural address: "To Seek a New Direction." This theme was selected because of my impression that, despite the fact that in 1928 the Congress of the United States had made a

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commitment to assist in the development and maintenance of Howard University . . . "as a university of the first rank," that commitment, I felt, had not been kept.

Shortly thereafter, we decided to assess the status of this institution's resources by selecting a group of major American universities whose characteristics were the same or similar to Howard's — except for the predominant racial or ethnic characteristics of their leadership, their faculties and their student bodies — using ourselves as the basis for such selection. Eleven such universities were chosen: Case Western Reserve, the University of Chicago, Duke, Emory, Georgetown, Johns Hopkins, Rochester, Stanford, Tulane, Vanderbilt and Yale.

We identified 20 some resource categories by which universities are generally evaluated, and using the data for the 1969-70 academic year, we found that Howard ranked last in every single category, except the size of its student population.

All of these institutions were among the top 100 in receiving federal support. None had ever received a charter from the United States Congress or an outright commitment to the American people and to the American people of African descent. Many of those 11 universities received far more support from [the] federal government than did Howard. Everyone who read that study in 1972 immediately realized that there was only one explanation for such inequity and disparity. And that explanation, simply put, is race.

In the words of Franklin Roosevelt, uttered in the dark days of the Depression, this is preeminently the time to speak the truth. Let us not be under any delusions. Let us not pretend. Let us not close our eyes to reality. Let us understand what has been our historic experience, and let us understand the nature and character of our current confrontation.

This year we updated that first study and, using the data for the 1983-84 academic year in the same 11 universities, we discovered that while we have made some gains, we have actually fallen behind.

This institution was not intended by its founders to be second class or second rate in any aspect of its life. There are some people — people with black skin — who are convinced and truly believe in their hearts that Howard University is not supposed to be among the top 10 or 20 universities in our nation. And my question to those who have such a belief is: Why not? And I dare them to give me an answer.

... We are lifters rather than leaners. We are drivers rather than drifters. We are winners rather than whiners.

We, as a nation, rightfully express outrage about the continuing system of oppression of Black people in the Republic of South Africa. But as we join hands with our brothers and sisters across the Atlantic Ocean, let us not forget that, in the effort to bring freedom to that land, we cannot ignore the fact that in the republic known as the United States of America there is the continuing oppression of a people simply and only because they are Black. No matter how much progress we think we have made in our stride toward freedom and opportunity for all of our citizens, it is an indisputable fact that the disease of racism is ubiquitous in our nation, and we are compelled to continue the struggle to remove it.

Time and time again, sometimes in the lonely hours of the [night], I have reflected upon the meaning of this institution, its history, its present trials and tribulations, and its future. And there have been moments of doubt, moments when I questioned the effort and the journey. And always . . . there have come to me, those words that were put to Jeremiah the prophet: "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 fall down, how

will you do in the jungle of the Jordan?" And with those words ringing in my ears, I have been compelled to gird up my loins and with renewed determination become committed over and over and over again to this university's ability to stand before the world and say we are indeed the worthy inheritors of our nation.

I have taken note of Voltaire's observation that civilization discloses that mankind can be divided into two kinds of people: those who choose to be a hammer and those who choose to be an anvil. And when asked what shall we be, the answer is clear. Howard University has no choice. It will continue to be a moving force in this world, forging and shaping a nation and a people, never willing to accept the role of a stationary object upon which the forces of history may beat. For here we are lifters rather than leaners. We are drivers rather than drifters. We are winners rather than whiners.

As we face the dawn of the 21st century, how will we do and what shall we be?

Our faculty has already made it known, and will continue to make it known, that there is no place or room at Howard for any teacher who believes that Black students cannot learn and fully participate in and benefit from a rigorous and demanding program of educational discipline. The Howard faculty has already made it clear that this is a faculty of scholars from whose teaching, research, and community service will come forth fruits that will be a lasting imprint upon the lives of thousands and thousands of people.

How will we do and what shall we be? Our administrative staffs demonstrate by their performance and by their competence that they are going to make it clear

to themselves and to others that Howard is not just a place of employment where one collects a paycheck, where students and others are nuisances to be tolerated or are the fit objects and subjects of abuse. . . .

The Howard student is a student who manifests to the world that those who come to Howard come here because they are committed to becoming leaders and are not content to be average or less than average, that they do not regard this institution as an alternative playground on which to make the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Howard students will compel all of us to understand that they are here to establish, to confirm, and to affirm their identity . . . to preserve their dignity and their self-respect, to have the opportunity at Howard to "mount up their wings as eagles, to run and not be weary, to walk and not be faint."

And the Howard trustees speak with one united voice that they hold in trust a national treasure and are determined to ensure that this institution is faithful to its historic mission and will be provided the resources required to this charge. . . .

And Howard's president and executive officers make it unequivocally clear that our positions require sacrifice and deprivation of personal ambition, that this institution does not exist as a place for us to exercise some kind of presumed power or authority, that there resides in us an unequivocal commitment to the institution as a whole and not to our personal interests.

And no one will ever have cause to question our stewardship or have doubts about our integrity and our rectitude.

. . . Neither principalities, nor powers, nor politicians, nor bureaucrats, nor ideologists shall stand between us and this institution.

How will we do and what shall we be?

Those are our answers. Let all who claim to love and revere Howard—whether trustees, executive officer, administrative staff, faculty, student, alumni or friend



. . . make a solemn oath and pledge that nothing, nothing shall separate us from the protection, the preservation, the promotion and the defense of this university.

Let us make it clear that no things present, no things past, no things future shall come between us and Howard. Let us make it known at home and abroad that neither principalities, nor powers, nor politicians, nor bureaucrats, nor ideologists shall stand between us and this institution. And let us be certain in our hearts that no circumstances—known or unknown—no situations—existing or to become existing—shall separate us from or confuse us about the meaning, the purpose, the mission, and the indispensability of this sacred place.

Let there be reverence for Howard. Let there be respect for Howard. Let there be conviction about Howard. Let there be commitment to Howard. Let there be faith in Howard. And let there be faithfulness to Howard. . . . □

The above was excerpted from an address by the president of the university at the Opening Convocation marking the beginning of Howard's 119th academic year on September 26.