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To Seek a New Direction: Howard in the Decade of the Seventies

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Cheek, James E.
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TO SEEK A NEW DIRECTION:
HOWARD IN THE DECADE OF THE SEVENTIES

Address by
Dr. James E. Cheek
On the Occasion of His Inauguration as the
Fifteenth President of Howard University
Howard University Campus
April 25, 1970

MR. CHAIRMAN, MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES, DISTINGUISHED DELEGATES AND REPRESENTATIVES, FELLOW ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICERS, FACULTY AND STUDENT COLLEAGUES, MEMBERS OF THE ALUMNI AND MY FRIENDS:

Our nation, just seven years away from the two hundredth anniversary of its revolution for freedom and human equality, is required to fulfill for our generation and in our time the promise it made to the world almost two centuries ago. Having fought on foreign shores several wars to defend, preserve and protect its beliefs, our nation is now required to wage a harder struggle within its borders to make those beliefs a reality for all of its citizens.

What we do as a nation in the next six years will be watched around the world by friend and foe alike to see whether this republic is willing and able to honor in practice what it proclaims in principle.

At no other time in American history has the danger to the American society been so great.

Today, the real danger to the American ideal does not lie among the people on foreign shores; it lies within our own midst and is represented by those who seek to preserve a system that is oppressive, by those who attempt to defend a society that is fragmented and by those who try to preserve an ideology that denies human liberty.

In the initial years of this new decade, the critical struggle of the nation will be at home and not abroad; and the effectiveness of our foreign policy will be determined by the character and substance of our domestic practices.

How a nation allocates its resources and to what issues it chooses to direct the people's will, reveal what a nation values most, what it cherishes, and what it hopes to be.

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At the time when the American idea was being created, the founding fathers cast their lot on the side of justice, freedom and equality. In words that still echo around the globe, they pledged a new nation to the fulfillment of man's ancient quest for human liberty. And by acts of courage and fortitude they made plain that the rights of men do not derive from the generosity of the state but from the benevolence of God.

The revolutionary idea of a society where man would be free, where the opportunities would be open and where the benefits would be equitable remains today as an idea which generates in the hearts of men acts of courage and valor. The validity of that idea will be tested in our time in a manner it has never been tested before.

In recent days our attention has been directed to a special problem that faces the planet Earth.

Our national leadership has pledged the nation's resources and galvanized the nation's will to confront and resolve the pollution of our physical environment. We have been awakened to the dangers which our technology has created, and we are preparing to fashion a technology to remove them.

Without question the issue of our physical environment is an issue of overriding concern and demands the attention it is now receiving.

But the pollution of our air, of our waters, of our soil, and the traffic jams of our highways are not the issues that will decide the fate of the nation.

The crises of our time and the real dangers to our national health are to be found in our social environment: in the sickness of our cities, in the failures of our public school, in the alienation of the young, in the crises between black and white and in the denial of equal access to the opportunities, rewards and benefits of our society to one-tenth or more of our native born citizens.

The noble vision which inspired the American effort has become blurred and the gallant will to make a dream come true has become paralyzed.

We can cleanse our air and purify our lakes and rivers, beautify our landscape and solve the problems of transportation and still remain a society in fragments, a people without values and a collection of states not united in will or purpose.

While we must manage knowledge to save the environment, it is also required that we create new knowledge to save the Republic.

Without a doubt the decade of the seventies will force our nation to come to terms -- perhaps once and for all -- with the issue of race and racism. At various stages in our national history this issue has suffered from neglect, both benign and malignant. In successive turns it has been treated indifferently,

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hypocritically, and cosmetically. Always manipulated by the requirements of political expediency, seldom if ever the object of political duty, the question of race now stands before us as that one question that may decide the fate of the nation and possibly the fate of the world.

Our generation will not be privileged to defer to the next generation the solution to this problem that divides the nation and that now threatens to tear apart the American fabric.

The gravity of this threat cannot be exaggerated and the urgency of the task we face cannot be overstated.

One hundred and three years ago this University was established to be one of the major instruments to assist in the task of healing the wounds created by civil strife and of righting the wrongs caused by generations of bondage.

It has served our nation and our people well. Those who have guided its development over more than a century - through times of tranquility and turbulence - never lost sight of the mission to be discharged or of the purpose to be pursued. We salute and honor with profound gratitude their vigilance, their sense of duty, their sacrifices, their patience in tribulation and their rejoicing in hope.

Our country and our world owe to them a lasting debt.

Now we have been summoned to take upon our shoulders the continuing task of helping our country fulfill its promise and of assisting our people in realizing their capability. Ours is a very special charge.

In the new decade we have just entered, we have begun an earnest search for a new direction; we have learned already that Howard in this decade must be willing to be one of the principal architects of our national destiny and one of the major engineers of our society's change.

We understand very well the bold demand that universities remain aloof from the great issues and questions of a social change, social goals and social purposes. Those who make such a demand insist that universities maintain a posture of interested detachment in order to preserve their academic freedom.

But while at Howard "academic freedom" is to be cherished and valued, human freedom is cherished and valued more. Hence we cannot stand aloof, morally neutral and socially passive. For us the business of education must be conducted not in the atmosphere of the museum where men are gathered to contemplate the past, but in the atmosphere of the true University where men are gathered to create the future.

In every discipline that we shall offer the knowledge we transmit, the truth we pursue and the public service we render will be guided by a profound understanding of the value and worth of human life.

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We shall strive to fashion the education we offer into a force for social regeneration marching hand in hand with the living and creative forces of the social order.

As a University we may not add much to the world's understanding of how best to navigate the distance of space in man's reach for the stars, but we surely can and must add mightily to the world's understanding of how man can best remove the distance between peoples and races in our search for peace and justice on earth.

We can bring to the new decade before us a profound new sense of man's worth and ultimate nobility, and building upon that create for ourselves and future generations a new humanism which may help to prevent the destruction of man and of mankind by the creations of his own and by the instruments of his own hands.

This, Howard is able to do.

In the Liberal Arts we must seek and find wholly new ground on which to fashion an aristocracy of knowledge and on which to create an aristocracy of leadership which will not be the exclusive possession of a particular race of one ethnic group. We shall use the Liberal Arts truly to liberate, and from that experience our students will know more profoundly the character of the quarry from which they have been dug and the nature of the rock from which they have been hewn. They shall have a pride that no man dare ridicule and they shall possess a dignity that no man dare dishonor.

In the Fine Arts we shall honor and celebrate the peculiar genius that long suffering and great oppression have fashioned as one of history's greatest gifts to man's understanding of human experience. In the visual and performing arts and in the inspired music drawn from the soul of a people we shall exhibit to the world a culture that no man can call deprived.

We shall train in our School of Law a new generation of jurists: men and women who will use the law to seek the ends of social justice and thereby preserve for both Black and White, human liberty.

In our Colleges of Medicine and Dentistry and the related schools of the health professions we shall try as diligently as we can, to produce men and women who will regard a healthy body and a healthy mind as a human right and not a privilege. By the examples of their teachers as well as by their precepts, we shall endow our students with the spirit of human compassion and with a profound regard for the sacredness of human life. We shall seek to inspire them to take their art and science, into the deltas of Mississippi, into the rural countryside and into the urban jungles of our cities to practice that art and science not for economic profit but for human well being.

In all of our other professional schools -- Engineering, Architecture, Business, Education, Religion and Social Work -- we shall begin the development

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of the new knowledge and the fashioning of the new social technology that will raise up new kinds of social engineers, technically competent and morally committed to the special needs of Black Americans, the institutions which serve them and the communities which they inhabit.

And in the new schools and colleges that we shall create and in the special institutes we shall establish, we shall seek to formulate new norms of excellence and more effective methods of extending the University beyond the campus to enhance the community which is our home as well as the community across the seas. We shall seek to lead and not to imitate and in all we undertake to do, we shall try to fashion a community of scholars where all the students are teachers and all the instructors are learners. By such an example we hope to help the academic world toward that reform the times demand.

We shall try to withhold prior judgement on who can be educated and who can profit from the experiences we offer. We shall establish an eliteness based upon what we graduate rather than upon what and whom we admit.

The national interest dictates that there be at least one university in this land unashamedly devoted -- in its public service -- to the special problems and special issues which the legacy of race has created. Howard is commanded to be such a university.

In our effort to help our nation renew itself we must stand before our countrymen and before the world as a bold and vivid contradiction to the belief that black men and the institutions which serve them are inherently, intrinsically and generically inferior.

By the labor of this institution in the decade of the seventies we shall try to destroy the myth of white supremacy and exalt the reality of human quality. Without apology for our origin, without shame for our character, and without equivocation about our purpose we shall try to help our nation take an honorable change of direction.

The hazards of the course we have set are well known to us; the dangers in this task are both vivid and real. But each generation of men must confront the tasks it has been assigned.

Ours is no easy assignment, but it must be done. How well it is discharged will depend in large measure upon the willingness of all of us to take up each others burdens in order that the oppressed may go free.

With the hand of God to guide our footsteps and the torch of right and justice to light our way, we pledge our best efforts and our best energies to the service of our people on behalf of our nation's future.

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