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Address at Howard University

Robert A. Taft

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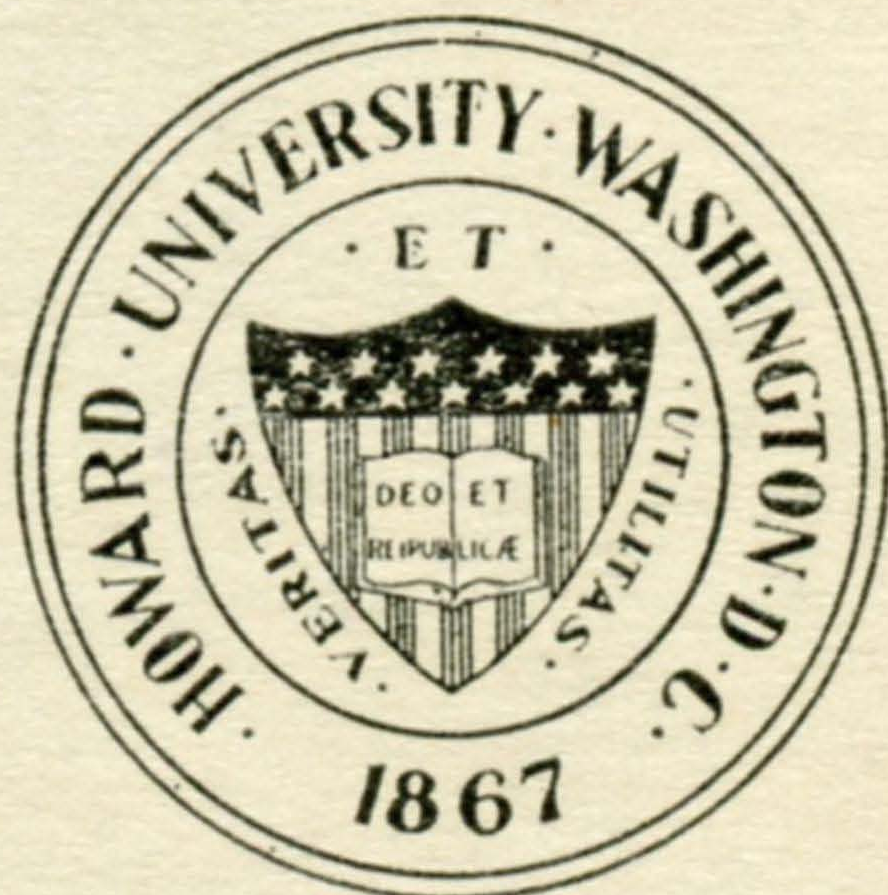
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Jaft, Robert A.,
Address at Harvard University

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ADDRESS AT HOWARD UNIVERSITY

March 2, 1939 - By Senator Robert A. Taft.

President Johnson and Alumni of Howard University:

I consider it a pleasure and a privilege to deliver the annual Charter Day Address to the Alumni of Howard University on the seventy-second anniversary of its founding. It is a peculiar pleasure to find that the Class of 1909 is one of the sponsors of this year's dinner, because my father delivered the Fortieth Annual Commencement Address when that class graduated in 1909. I have welcomed the opportunity to see for the first time this time-honored institution, one of the great universities of the United States, and the center of Negro education. I have been familiar for many years with Wilberforce University in the State of Ohio, and know the tremendous effect it has had on the progress of the people which it serves, but in Howard University I see even greater accomplishment.

Seventy-two years ago today it was established by Act of Congress, under the urgent insistence of General O. O. Howard, and General Howard became its President. He realized, as did many others, that not only did the United States owe to those who had long been held as slaves the duty of providing an education, but that only through such education could the country meet the problems created by the presence of so many million colored people scattered among the rest of the population which had had such superior advantages. For years General Howard and his Board of Trustees struggled to keep the University alive, but today we can well realize how effective and important was their work. In this great university, over two thousand students are enrolled in nine undergraduate and professional schools and colleges. Ten thousand, two hundred and sixty-six graduates have been sent out throughout the United States, more than half of them teachers, who have extended the influence of this university to thousands of Negro boys and girls, and directed the course of Negro education in hundreds of other schools and universities throughout the country.

In the field of medicine and law, the University has played an especially important part. 46% of all Negro physicians and surgeons now practicing in the United States are Howard graduates; 40% of all Negro dentists. Nearly half of the colored lawyers actively practicing law in the United States are graduates of Howard University Law School, and a large proportion of Negro leaders in the field of religion, of teaching, of pharmacy, of engineering and architecture receive their education here. So that it may well be said that no institution in the world has had more to do with the progress of the colored people than has Howard University.

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And it may be said further that the progress of the colored people in America in those seventy-two years is probably greater than the progress of any race in a similar period in the history of the world. They started literally from nothing. The great majority had been slaves, and among the few freedmen were a very limited number who had education; but in seventy-two years they have risen until there are able colored leaders in every field of activity. In education, in medicine, in law, in art, in music, in athletics, in science, in industry, the colored people have proved their inherent ability, and have rapidly developed leaders of outstanding quality. They have naturally paid peculiar attention to the development of the south. A colored scientist has developed many industrial products from cotton and peanuts, which have given an increased market to those products, and added thousands of jobs to the payroll of private industry.

I wish to refer especially to one man who died about a year ago, who was certainly one of the most versatile of American leaders, James Weldon Johnson. He was a university graduate, a lawyer, an author, a magazine editor, a poet, and a musician. He was Consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua, appointed by my father, and not only spoke Spanish, but wrote poetry in Spanish. He wrote a notable autobiography, a book of American Negro poetry, two books of American Negro spirituals. What is accepted as the Negro National Anthem was his work. His was a life of service. There are many others, and I pay a special tribute to him only as an example of the kind of leader which the Negro race has produced.

In the political field you have also developed leaders, particularly in our cities. The character of colored political leadership in Ohio has commanded my attention and interest during the past year. In my own city of Cincinnati, Dr. R. P. McClain has been elected president pro tem of the Cincinnati City Council under our charter form of government.

To what has this great progress been due? You have had the assistance of men like General Howard and many others. Howard University has had the assistance of the United States Government, but not to any extraordinary extent. The money appropriated, for instance, is hardly more than the money appropriated by the City of Cincinnati for its municipal university, serving both white and black citizens of Cincinnati; much less than most of the State Universities. The progress has been due to the colored people themselves, and to the inherent qualities which they possess. Today it has become fashionable to look to the government to solve our problems, and rely on government action and laws to advance the welfare of the people, both white and colored. We are too much inclined to lean on the government, which in fact amounts to leaning on other people; but very little real progress has ever been made except through the earnest and sincere effort of those who make that progress. The government must assure the opportunity for progress. It must create conditions in which every man who has the ability to be a leader of other men can forge his way ahead, regardless how humble his origin, and furnish the inspiration on which all progress is based.

The foundation for the progress of the colored people is found in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and particularly in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. They ask nothing more than every other citizen is entitled to, the right to life, liberty and property, the right to

vote, the right to a fair trial, and all the other rights which are guaranteed to every citizen. It is to guarantee these rights that the colored people are asking for and are entitled to an anti-lynching bill, to protect those federal constitutional rights which they now have in theory, but which in some places they do not have in fact.

So, also, no one is more interested than the colored people in maintaining the independence of the courts, in order that no matter what the majority in any community may be, no matter who elects the legislative body or the executive, the colored man may receive from independent judges a fair trial in the protection of his constitutional rights. Nothing is more characteristic of the American form of government than this protection given to individual rights. Those who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution created a government to be directed by a majority of the people, and of course our government today must reflect the will of that majority. But they said that there were certain unalienable rights belonging to every individual, and that no matter how great the majority, and no matter how strongly the majority felt, they could not destroy the rights of a minority, no matter how small and weak that minority might be. We have seen what happens in countries where there are no constitutions and no independent courts. We have seen what the Germans have done to a minority, and we have seen what the Russians have done to a minority. It is not enough to have constitutional rights, unless we have independent courts to enforce them, because Congress has frequently shown that doubts of the constitutionality of a law, no matter how reasonable, do not restrain it. No one can be more concerned to maintain the Constitution and the division of powers provided by it than the colored race.

But I say again that the function of government in this respect is largely negative and defensive. If we are seeking progress towards a higher civilization, then the colored people, like the white people, must look much more to their own initiative and their own efforts, assisted, but not controlled, by the government.

True progress must be based at least in part on improvement in material welfare, and as a result the progress of the colored race has been badly checked by the depression which began in 1929. No one else has suffered so much from the scourge of unemployment. Unfortunately, employers in general have not followed the example of men like Mr. Harvey Firestone, in Akron, Ohio. Mr. Firestone undertook to see that colored people were employed in nearly every department of his great rubber company, and that when the time for lay-offs came, no greater proportion of colored people were laid off than of white people. But it has been generally true that colored people are more likely to lose their jobs when employment declines, and find it harder to get them back when employment increases. In other words, there is still an economic discrimination which we must do our utmost to reduce.

Abraham Lincoln said in the famous Lincoln - Douglas Debates, "In the right to eat the bread which his own hand earns, the Negro is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man." But we must see also that he is also the equal of every living man in the right to earn that bread.

Apparently, however, the solution is not government assistance or the passing of laws. No government has ever poured out so generously money for relief and money for work relief like W.P.A. as the present government. And yet today, after many years, millions of men are unemployed, and an undue proportion of colored people are unemployed. We must be grateful for the government action, tiding many men and women over the emergency of the depression, but it is not much of a substitute for real jobs, and it does not provide an economic basis on which progress can be actively continued.

In fact, should the present condition become permanent, there is a real danger to the colored people. Government relief cannot do much more than provide a wage basis, very little if at all above the needs for a bare existence, and if more and more of the colored people drift on to this W.P.A. scale, it will leave them ultimately in a kind of economic servitude akin to serfdom. The man on W.P.A. has no opportunity to go forward. He receives only enough to provide a bare existence, and cannot be of the slightest assistance in bringing real progress to the race.

As a matter of fact, the whole movement toward government regulation and regimentation is more of a threat to the colored race than it is to the rest of the nation. If the government ultimately comes to the point of fixing all wages, hours, prices and practices, if it comes to the point of telling every man in what industry he shall work, and what type of job he shall enjoy, there is a real danger that the colored people will get the worst jobs in the worst industries. Under anything resembling regimentation, minorities are not likely to do the regimenting, or have much to say about where they shall be fitted into the social picture.

And so the colored people, even more than anyone else, are interested in government policies which will stimulate private industry, and stimulate the creation of more jobs and more prosperity. If those are provided, then the education provided by Howard University and many other institutions will show to colored leaders the means by which they can go forward. They will always have to fight against certain narrow prejudices, such as that which seems to have excluded Marian Anderson from a proper auditorium in the City of Washington, and has excluded them from employment in various industries. But in that fight they will have the support of the great majority of the white people, and all of the intelligent white leaders. Your goal is equal opportunity, the same goal as that of every other American.

Nothing is so important to the colored people as education. Some institutions are engaged in teaching vocations to boys and girls so that they may be able to give employers a reason why they should be employed and earn a fair wage when they are employed. Some times I think the education given by our public schools is so general that the boy and girl graduates, while they have a good background, are not able to do any particular job better than they could before going to school. Colored people have not taken their proportionate place as business men and they may well devote their attention to operating more of the stores which serve their own people.

Lord Brougham said once in the House of Commons, "Education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave." Howard University has still its big task to perform in training teachers from many schools, in training those able to enter the professions, and in training men who may become the leaders and prophets of the race. In that task you deserve the support of all Americans - black and white. I hope, as a member of the Senate, I can help carry through after the ten-year plan is completed.

You must always preserve inviolate the Constitution of the United States, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. On a firm foundation of constitutional freedom, you can build an economic security, and on such economic security you can build a higher civilization, but you can only do it by your own efforts, and the efforts of the members of your group, without leaning on the white people or on the Government, but with their willing assistance.

America will not overlook the great part played by the colored race in the development of this great nation.

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