

# All Things Cynthia McKinney

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Cynthia McKinney

"Make Gentle Our Country in This World"

California State University, Los Angeles Cultural Graduation

June 7, 2008

Good evening friends, families, parents, staff, administration, faculty, and graduates in the Class of 2008, Cal State LA!

I have had the opportunity to travel throughout this country and around the world. I have seen the vast wealth of this country and its potential to do good. I have seen policies made in Washington, DC and their impact on individual lives in other parts of the world. As wealthy as this country is, however, for far too many, this country's greatness is yet to be felt. What you and I will do about that is what I want to talk very briefly to you about today. Things don't have to be as they are now. And you, my young graduates, can help yourselves, our community, our country, and this world. I hope to tell you how.

As a mother of a son who is also a 2008 college graduate, and today as your self-appointed "political" mother, I say to you that I wish I could send you into a better United States and into a better world.

Even now, something strange has happened to our Dream. The American Dream. Coretta and Martin's Dream. Is now contorted. Distorted. Twisted. Disfigured. And I'll tell you why.

This country. Made rich by the grace and bounty of God and by the sweat of your grandparents' labors. Made strong by your parents' sacrifices. Made honest by a movement that recognized our weaknesses. And made free by the sacrifices of this nation's Greatest Generation.

The people of this country deserve the best and so do you.

This country should produce good jobs. And while we recognize that all work has dignity, people in this country find it increasingly difficult to have any work at all. As more and more U.S. corporations increase their profit by shipping highly-skilled jobs overseas, the jobscape in this country is tenuous. This transfer of capacity, facilitated by the trade policy votes of our elected representatives makes us all less secure.

Part of the answer is a jobs program that makes much-needed investments in both our infrastructure and our workers. Along with a tax code that rewards companies that hire and train America's un-and under-employed. Imagine an energy policy that is also a jobs policy. Corporations must pay a living wage. The current situation of people risking death to get into the U.S. takes advantage of the fact that we don't have an international labor policy that uplifts and protects the rights of all the world's workers wherever they are employed. President John F. Kennedy reminded us that a rising tide lifts all boats. Our people need a rising tide.

Instead, our country is in debt. The United States has become the greatest debtor nation in the world. In just four years, our country's economic condition deteriorated by over \$22 trillion. The U.S. national debt is estimated to be a whopping \$53 trillion, not counting ongoing war costs. The situation is growing worse steadily because instead of making investments in the things our country needs, our elected policy makers pour billions down a pipedream rooted in the war machine, and some even profit from it.

And incredibly, alongside our nation's military industrial complex is its prison complex, increasingly denoted by injustice. The United States is now the incarceration capital of the world. However, Barry Scheck of the Innocence Project informs us that the "typical" DNA exoneration case often involves a sex crime allegedly committed by a black man in which the white victim is often the only witness. While political prisoners from the COINTELPRO era remain incarcerated, prosecution of the San Francisco 8 and the photos from Abu Ghraib reveal that the United States is also a torture specialist, reportedly maintaining a fleet of ships and jets specifically for the illegal practice. The Drug War kills, displaces, sprays with toxics Afro-Colombians and provides an excuse to roll back our civil liberties here at home, while penalizing those suffering from addiction. Prisons for profit encourage people to buy stock in prisons rather than investigate when the system fails to deliver justice.

And as if all that isn't enough, people in this country are growing poorer. Sadly, for the last eleven years, Congress has given the Pentagon a larger and larger

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share of your tax dollars, not counting war spending. Your Congress is likely to give the Pentagon this year more than it has ever received since World War II. And yet, on September 11th, this colossal investment in military power projection all over the planet, including in outer space, couldn't even protect itself.

Even more incredibly, while the Pentagon receives record budgets, extreme poverty in this country reached its highest point in 30 years, according to a McClatchy study. It found that in 2005, 16 million Americans were living in severe poverty, with 37 million people living below the poverty line, including 13 million children. Severely poor Americans now can be seen across the urban, suburban, and rural landscape. They walk among us, are in our midst. Globalization's gift to us is that now, poverty is not just confined to the southern part of our country where I come from, but severe poverty exists even in California. And the seat of U.S. power projection in the world . . . Washington, DC . . . contains the greatest concentration of severe poverty in our country, exceeding even post-Katrina Mississippi and Louisiana. The New York Times calculated that 60 million Americans now live on less than \$7 a day.

Without a living wage, the average health care premium for a family of four exceeds the annual gross income of a full-time minimum wage worker. That means that health care is out of reach for far too many. According to the CIA World Fact Book, 2008 estimates, the United States is 47th in the world for life expectancy, below Canada, below France, and below Israel. 43rd in the world for infant mortality, worse than South Korea, worse than Israel, worse than Cuba. Insecurity in this country is real.

But taking off our clothes at the airport isn't going to solve it!

And the final bit of economic information: because of predatory lending, the sub-prime mortgage crisis has resulted in a record number of foreclosures that disproportionately affect Black and Latino households. According to United for a Fair Economy, foreclosures have caused the greatest loss of Black wealth in modern U.S. history -- that's since slavery. \$92 billion. \$98 billion lost for Latinos. Yet the CEOs of the banks are receiving record remuneration and the Fed is bailing out the banks. Congress is yet to act on behalf of distressed homeowners who are being overlooked by their own policy makers.

And you, my proud graduates. How many of you are in debt because of student loans. In other parts of the world, education is valued and so the people demand and the policy makers provide affordable higher education, within the average family's reach. Why not here? We do not have to have a 50% high school drop out rate, either.

But we will continue to get what I've described and worse if we continue to accept what we've been given. Frederick Douglass reminded us that power concedes nothing without a demand. What I want to tell you today is that you have the power to lodge a demand for a public policy result that will make our communities more prosperous and the world a safer place for us all. But understanding what our demands must be requires critical thinking and deep analysis of our current situation.

Sadly, even in this year of decision, however, these were not the issues that were put before you. And the reason is so that you will not lodge the demand. The organization of politics today, in combination with the media, is so that you won't put forward the correct demand that will result in public policy changes desperately needed in this country.

We've had two Presidential elections stolen from us and I'm asking everyone to remain alert to avoid a third. And in everything that you do, remember that you can make a difference wherever you are and that there's everything right with putting forward a demand. Four university students in Greensboro, North Carolina put forward a demand to be served. The result was the Civil Rights Act. Black people put forward a demand for the right to vote. The result was the Voting Rights Act. You can make a difference. Here's how.

Here Cal State has shown you that there is a community dedicated to truth, the development of individual potential, and the pursuit of social justice. Cal State has shown you, also, that service is leadership. As you serve, so too do you lead. I hope that this idea of service will become a part of you. What we need now, more than ever, are servants who are also leaders. Not a single one of the issues I've spoken about today is unsolvable. We the people and the voters are the key to the political will that can solve them.

I hope that each of you will lead us all in service, dedicated to justice, solving the community's problems with commitment, passion, reason, and truth. Your moral compass, rooted in your Cal State experience, will take you many places.

It will take some of you into media rooms as journalists--but you will inform the public with your heart. It will take others of you into the courtroom where you will protect our Constitution--with your heart. Some of you will go into the classroom where you will wrap your loving arms around our country's children--with all your heart. While others of you will heal our bodies and our minds--with your heart. Into corporate boardrooms some of you will go, but it won't be business-as-usual, because you'll make a difference with your heart. Maybe some of you will go to Congress -- where you'll gain a reputation for being intelligent, risk-taking, spunky, and passionate -- because you'll make public policy with your heart. And one of you might even become the President of the United States -- unlike any other President this country has ever had -- because you'll govern with your heart.

more

## The Cost Of War

### AMERICAN CASUALTIES OF IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

Dead:	4,569
Wounded:	31,984
Injured:	10,180
Ill:	28,451

DoD and VA via Veterans for Common Sense (May 07 2008)  
warroomshome.org  
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The Details

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No matter what twists or turns your life may take, walk that path with all your heart. And finally, as one who has been called a lot of terrible names, don't ever let other people's failure to understand you get you down, because as long as you remain rooted in the pursuit of justice while in service to others, and grounded in the truth -- in the end, the one name they'll be forced to call you -- is right.

Thank you for inviting me to share your graduation ceremony with you! Now, go out there and make gentle the life of this country in the world!

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