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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Howard University Convocation

Washington, DC | September 28, 2007

It's a privilege to be a part of today's convocation and an honor to receive this degree from Howard. There are few other universities that have played so central a role in breaking down yesterday's barriers and inching this country closer to the ideals we see inscribed on the monuments throughout this city.

It was Howard that sent the first African-American to the United States Senate. It was Howard that graduated the first African-American to become governor and the first to become mayor of the largest city in the country. It was here, within the halls of this campus, where Thurgood Marshall huddled with the brilliant minds of his day to craft the arguments in Brown v. Board that ignited a movement that changed the world. And it is because of these victories that a black man named Barack Obama can stand before you today as a candidate for President of the United States of America.

But I am not just running to make history. I'm running because I believe that together, we can change history's course. It's not enough just to look back in wonder of how far we've come - I want us to look ahead with a fierce urgency at how far we have left to go. I believe it's time for this generation to make its own mark - to write our own chapter in the American story. After all, those who came before us did not strike a blow against injustice only so that we would allow injustice to fester in our time.

Thurgood Marshall did not argue Brown so that we would accept a country where too many African-American men end up in prison because we'd rather spend more to jail a 25-year-old than to educate a five-year-old.

Dr. King did not take us to the mountaintop so that we would allow a terrible storm to ravage those who were stranded in the valley; he would not have expected that it would take a breach in our levees to reveal a breach in our compassion; that it would take a hurricane to reveal the hungry God asks us to feed; the sick He asks us to care for; the least of these He commands us to treat as our own.

The teenagers and college students who left their homes to march in the streets of Birmingham and Montgomery; the mothers who walked instead of taking the bus after a long day of doing somebody else's laundry and cleaning somebody else's kitchen - they didn't brave fire hoses and Billy clubs so that their grandchildren and their great-grandchildren would still wonder at the beginning of the 21st century whether their vote would be counted; whether their civil rights would be protected by their government; whether justice would be equal and opportunity would be theirs.

And I am certain that nine children did not walk through the doors of a school in Little Rock so that our children would have to see nooses hanging at a school in Louisiana. We have more work to do.

It's a fitting reminder that the fiftieth anniversary of Little Rock fell on this week. Because when the doors to that school finally opened, a nation responded. The President sent the United States Army to stand on the side of justice. The Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957. The Department of Justice created a Civil Rights Division. And millions of Americans took to the streets in the following months and years so that more children could walk through more doors.

These were not easy choices to make at the time. President Eisenhower was warned by some that sending the Army down to Little Rock would be political suicide. The resistance to civil rights reform was fierce. And we know that those who marched for freedom did so at great risk to themselves and their families.

But they did it because they understood that sometimes there are moments when what's truly risky is not to act. What's truly risky is to let the same injustice remain year after year. What's truly risky is to walk away and pretend it never happened. What's truly risky is to accept things as they are instead of working for what could be.

In a media-driven culture that's more obsessed with who's beating who in Washington and how long Paris Hilton is going to jail, these moments are harder to spot today. But every so often, they do appear. Sometimes it takes a hurricane. And sometimes it takes a travesty of justice like the one we've seen in Jena, Louisiana.

There are some who will make Jena about the fight itself. And it's true that we have to do more as parents to instill in our children that violence is always wrong. It's wrong when it happens on the streets of Chicago and it's wrong when it happens at a schoolyard in Louisiana. Violence is not the answer. Non-violence was the soul of the Civil Rights Movement, and we have to do a better job of teaching our children that virtue.

But we also know that to truly understand Jena, you have to look at what happened both before and after that fight. You have to listen to the hateful slurs that flew through the halls of a school. You have to know the full measure of the damage done by that arson. You have to look at those nooses hanging on that schoolyard tree. And you have to understand how badly our system of justice failed those six boys in the days after that fight - the outrageous charges; the unreasonable and excessive sentences; the public defender who did not call a single witness.

Like Katrina did with poverty, Jena exposed glaring inequities in our justice system that were around long before that schoolyard fight broke out. It reminds us of the fact that we have a system that locks away too many young, first-time, non-violent offenders for the better part of their lives - a decision that's made not by a judge in a courtroom, but by politicians in Washington. It reminds us that we have certain sentences that are based less on the kind of crime you commit than on what you look like and where you come from. It reminds us that we have a Justice Department whose idea of prosecuting civil rights violations is trying to rollback affirmative action programs at our college and universities; a Justice Department whose idea of prosecuting voting rights violations is to look for voting fraud in black and Latino communities where it doesn't exist.

We know these inequities are there. We know they're wrong. And yet they go largely unnoticed until people find the courage to stand up and say they're wrong. Until someone finally says, "It's wrong that Scooter Libby gets no jail time for compromising our national security, but a 21-year-old honor student is still sitting in a Georgia prison for something that wasn't even a felony. That's wrong."

It's not always easy to stand up and say this. I commend those of you here at Howard who have spoken out on Jena 6 or traveled to the rally in Louisiana. I commend those of you who've spoken out on the Genarlow Wilson case. I know it can be lonely protesting this kind of injustice. I know there's not a lot of glamour in it.

When I was a state Senator in Illinois, we had a death penalty system that had sent thirteen innocent people to death row. Thirteen innocent men - that we know of. I wanted to reform the system. And I was told by almost everyone that it wasn't possible. That I wouldn't be able to get police officers and civil rights advocates; Democrats and Republicans to all agree that we should videotape confessions to make sure they weren't coerced. Folks told me that there was too much political risk involved.

But I believed that it was too risky not to act. And after awhile people with opposing views came together and started listening. And we ended up reforming that death penalty system. And we did the same thing when I passed a law to expose racial profiling. So don't ever let anyone tell you that change isn't possible. Don't let them tell you that speaking out and standing up against injustice is too risky. What's too risky is keeping quiet. What's too risky is looking the other way.

I don't want to be standing here and talking about another Jena four years from now because we didn't have the courage to act today. I don't want this to be another issue that ends up being ignored once the cameras are turned off and the headlines disappear. It's time to seek a new dawn of justice in America.

From the day I take office as President, America will have a Justice Department that is truly dedicated to the work it began in the days after Little Rock. I will rid the department of ideologues and political cronies, and for the first time in eight years, the Civil Rights Division will actually be staffed with civil rights lawyers who prosecute civil rights violations, and employment discrimination, and hate crimes. And we'll have a Voting Rights Section that actually defends the right of every American to vote without deception or intimidation. When

flyers are placed in our neighborhoods telling people to vote on the wrong day, that won't only be an injustice, it will be a crime.

As President, I will also work every day to ensure that this country has a criminal justice system that inspires trust and confidence in every American, regardless of age, or race, or background. There's no reason that every single person accused of a crime shouldn't have a qualified public attorney to defend them. We'll recruit more public defenders to the profession by forgiving college and law school loans - and I will ask some of the brilliant minds here at Howard to take advantage of that offer. There's also no reason we can't pass a racial profiling law like I did in Illinois, or encourage state to reform the death penalty so that innocent people do not end up on death row.

When I'm President, we will no longer accept the false choice between being tough on crime and vigilant in our pursuit of justice. Dr. King said it's not either-or, it's both-and. We can have a crime policy that's both tough and smart. If you're convicted of a crime involving drugs, of course you should be punished. But let's not make the punishment for crack cocaine that much more severe than the punishment for powder cocaine when the real difference between the two is the skin color of the people using them. Judges think that's wrong. Republicans think that's wrong. Democrats think that's wrong, and yet it's been approved by Republican and Democratic Presidents because no one has been willing to brave the politics and make it right. That will end when I am President.

I think it's time we also took a hard look at the wisdom of locking up some first-time, non-violent drug users for decades. Someone once said that "...long minimum sentences for first-time users may not be the best way to occupy jail space and/or heal people from their disease." That someone was George W. Bush - six years ago. I don't say this very often, but I agree with the President. The difference is, he hasn't done anything about it. When I'm President, I will. We will review these sentences to see where we can be smarter on crime and reduce the blind and counterproductive warehousing of non-violent offenders. And we will give first-time, non-violent drug offenders a chance to serve their sentence, where appropriate, in the type of drug rehabilitation programs that have proven to work better than a prison term in changing bad behavior. So let's reform this system. Let's do what's smart. Let's do what's just.

Now, there is no doubt that taking these steps will restore a measure of justice and equality to America. They will also restore a sense of confidence to the American people that the system doesn't just work - it works for everyone.

But there is a broader point I want to make today.

If I have the opportunity to lead this nation, I will always be a President who hears your voice and understands your concerns; a President whose story is like so many of your own - whose life's work has been the unfinished work of our long march towards justice. And I will stand up for you, and fight for you, and wake up every day thinking about how to make your lives better.

But the truth is, one man cannot make a movement. No single law can erase the prejudice in the heart of a child who hangs a noose on a tree; or the callousness of a prosecutor who bypasses justice in the pursuit of vengeance. No one leader, no matter how shrewd or experienced, can prevent teenagers from killing other teenagers on the streets of our cities; or free our neighborhoods from the grip of hopelessness; or make real the promise of opportunity and equality for every citizen.

Only a country can do these things. Only this country can do these things. And that is why if you give me the chance to serve this nation, the most important thing I will do as your President is ask you to serve it too. The most important thing I'll do is call on you every day to take a risk and do your part to carry this movement forward. Against great odds and amidst deep cynicism, I will ask you to believe again that we can right the wrongs we see in America.

I would not have driven out to Chicago after college to organize jobless neighborhoods if I didn't believe this was possible. I wouldn't have organized a voter registration drive, or become a civil rights lawyer, or a constitutional law professor, or a state Senator, or a U.S. Senator if I didn't believe this was possible. I would not be standing here today if I didn't believe this was possible.

And I know that you believe it's possible too. One of the most inspiring things about the response to Jena was that it did not begin with the actions of any one leader. The call went out to thousands across the internet and black radio and on college campuses like this one. And like the young Americans of another era, you left your homes, and got on buses, and traveled South. It's what happened two years earlier when students here at Howard and Americans from every walk of life took it upon themselves to try and rescue a city that was

drowning. It's how real change and true justice have always come about.

It takes a movement to lift a nation. It will take a movement to go into our cities and say that it's not enough to just fix our criminal justice system; what we really need is to make sure that our kids don't end up there in the first place. We need to set up child care and after school programs and job training and drug counseling to give our children a place to turn to. And we need parents to start acting like parents and spend more time with their children and read to them once in awhile.

It will take a movement to finish what began in Topeka, Kansas and Little Rock, Arkansas. It will take a movement of Americans from every city and town, of every race and background to stand up and say that no matter what you look like or where you come from, every child in America should have the opportunity to receive the best education this country has to offer. Every child. It will take a movement to demand that we rebuild our crumbling schools; that we invest in early childhood education; that we recruit an army of new teachers, and pay them better, and support them more. It will take a movement to ensure that every young person gets the chance that Howard gave all of you; to say that at the beginning of the 21st century, a college education is no longer a luxury for those who can afford it; it is the birthright of every American.

So when you go back to your classrooms and your dorm rooms and you begin another year at Howard University, I ask you to remember how far we've come, but I urge you to think hard about where we need to go. I urge you to think about the risks you will take and the role you will play in building the movement that will get us there. And I ask you remember the story of Moses and Joshua.

Most of you know that Moses was called by God to lead his people to the Promised Land. And in the face of a Pharaoh and his armies, across an unforgiving desert and along the walls of an angry sea, he succeeded in leading his people out of bondage in Egypt. He led them through great dangers, and they got far enough so that Moses could point the way towards freedom on the far banks of the river Jordan.

And yet, it was not in God's plan to have Moses cross the river. Instead He would call on Joshua to finish the work that Moses began. He would ask Joshua to take his people that final distance.

Everyone in this room stands on the shoulders of many Moses. They are the courageous men and women who marched and fought and bled for the rights and freedoms we enjoy today. They have taken us many miles over an impossible journey.

But you are members of the Joshua Generation. And it is now up to you to finish the work that they began. It is up to you to cross the river.

When Joshua discovered the challenge he faced, he had his doubts and his worries. But the Lord told Joshua not to fear. He said, "Be strong and have courage, for I am with you wherever you go."

Those are the words I will leave you with today. Be strong and have courage. Be strong and have courage in the face of injustice. Be strong and have courage in the face of prejudice and hatred. Be strong and have courage in the face of joblessness and helplessness and hopelessness. Be strong and have courage, in the face of our doubts and fears, in the face of skepticism, in the face of cynicism, in the face of a mighty river. Be strong and have courage and let us cross over to that Promised Land together. Congratulations on another year, and thank you so much.

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