

Address to Howard  
5/9/98

**First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton**  
**Commencement Address to Howard University**  
**Washington, D.C.**  
**May 9, 1998**

Thank you very much Mr. President and I must say that I am deeply honored by this honorary degree and I am deeply privileged to be here. But I think in light of the circumstances this will not be an oration. Rather, I will do a few things very briefly because I too want to see the graduates get the degrees that they have worked so hard to receive.

Let me thank Howard for inviting me to be part of this commencement. I am always pleased to come to the campus of this great University. I am delighted to be part of this commencement ceremony where so many of you have worked so hard. I, too, congratulate the families, the parents and grandparents, the husbands and wives and children of all of the graduates. And I wish every mother in the audience a Happy Mothers' day.

I would just hope that because of the inclement weather that we will put our focus where it needs to be, on the young men and women who are graduating in the class of 1998. They stand on the shoulders of many who have come before who have already been mentioned. But this is a moment to look forward; this is after all a commencement. So to that end I would like to offer just a few parting words of advice and I will give the written text to Howard and allow Howard to print it at some later date for anybody who thinks they might have missed something that I've cut out.

First, let me just - if you remember anything from this rainy morning speaking as a part from the moment of celebration that you have earned - let me just echo the words of some people who I think have given us good advice in the past. Follow if you can the example, without ever forgetting our past, learning to forgive, that has been said by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, "Learn always that you never have to give up".

The best commencement speech that I've ever heard reported was given one day by Winston Churchill when he came to the microphone on a sunny day, not a rainy one, and said, "Never, never, never give up" and sat down. I would only add my final words to those that I think will stand us all in good stead and that is from my own experience one of the ways to get through the good and the not so good days that lie ahead of you as with any human being is to learn the discipline of gratitude. Find something to be grateful for every single day. Find ways of expressing that gratitude to those around you, don't take the small acts of kindness that are done to you or that you do for granted. Go forth from this great university with a commitment to living up to the ideals and values that it has tried to instill in you.

I hope for each one of you the future holds out the possibility of personal happiness, professional reward and success, and an understanding of what it means to be an American, a citizen and a human being as we move toward the 21st Century. Congratulations graduates.



# Howard University Commencement '98

130<sup>TH</sup> COMMENCEMENT CONVOCATION  
Saturday, May 9, 1998

## CONVOCATION ORATION

First Lady  
Hillary Rodham Clinton



Good morning. President Swygert; Dr. Antoine Garibaldi, Provost; Board of Trustees; faculty, staff, alumni, parents and most of all, Howard University's class of 1998. It's wonderful to be back here at Howard – and to receive the Honorary Doctor of Law. It's also a true pleasure to be able to participate in a day that holds so much promise for you as individuals – and so much hope for our community and our nation. Thank you, President Swygert, for inviting me to come – not only to celebrate Howard's 130<sup>th</sup> year of academic excellence and leadership – but to help send off another outstanding class of Howard graduates into the world.

Even in my short few years in Washington, I feel Howard University holds a special significance for me. I came here early on to participate in services at your beautiful Chapel – and to walk around this historic campus. Last year, I delivered a graduation address to Banneker's high school students – here at Howard. I particularly wanted to thank this university for giving me the opportunity last June to provide a retrospective on my first trip to Africa. It meant a great deal to me to be able to come here to share that extraordinary experience with many of you, and to speak with you afterwards about your own reactions.

It's impossible for anyone to come to this campus – whether visitor or student – and not feel the richness of Howard's tradition and achievements over the years – and a reverence for those who have paved the way for tomorrow's leaders.

Many years ago, Zora Neale Hurston wrote about what it was like for her to listen to Howard's alma mater being sung – on a day much like today. "My soul" – she said – "stood on tip toe and stretched up to take in all that it meant. So I was careful to do my class work and be worthy to stand there under the shadow of the hovering spirit of Howard. I felt the ladder beneath my feet."

Today, all of you now stand on that ladder – thanks to so many people in your own lives, and in the life and tradition of this great institution.

You are here surely thanks to your parents and family members, who have never given up on you – or stopped loving you – even if you didn't know you needed that support. So I want to applaud all of the parents here today, many of whom have sacrificed so that you could gain this world-class education. I also want to wish every mother here a joyous Happy Mother's Day tomorrow. What a great Mother's Day gift – to see your child graduate from college.

Today's graduating students also owe this day of celebration to the tall shoulders upon which they stand. Try to imagine our world without the passion for justice of a Thurgood Marshall; the transforming words of a Zora Neale Hurston or a Toni Morrison; the international leadership of an Andrew Young; the scientific breakthroughs of an E. Franklin Frazier; or the contributions of so many African Americans who over the years have found inspiration within these walls.

Whether it's the first African-American Senator [Senator Edward Brooke], or the first African-American NASA directors of shuttle operations [Isaac T. Gillan]; or the first African-American president of the American College of Surgeons [Dr. LaSalle D. Leffall]; Howard has been the springboard for pioneers in every field of the American experience.

I also want to mention that some of Howard's more recent graduates have played very prominent roles in this Administration – including the first African-American Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo West – and the President and I are truly grateful for their contributions.

Affairs Togo West – and the President and I are truly grateful for their contributions.

But I wanted to come back here today not just because Howard is a great historically black university – but because it is a great American university – and a world class institution. Your graduates are not only symbols of pride and accomplishment for the African-American community. They are individuals from many communities and nations, who have become leaders in their own communities, but also who have found ways down through the generations to reach out across the barriers that divide us, and enrich our efforts – however faltering at times – to become a more perfect union.

And here, I want to mention just one more example of Howard being at the forefront – and pushing the boundaries. Two years ago you launched a Women's Ambassador conference – the first time ever that women ambassadors from around the world have been brought together to discuss world diplomacy in a university setting. And I applaud you for that initiative. Amplifying the voices of those who have traditionally been shut out has been one of the cornerstones of Howard's legacy – and one from which we have all benefited.

I think I know a little about how the members of the class of '98 feel right now. The excitement and sense of accomplishment you must feel. The enormous pride you have for your outstanding woman's basketball team winning its third consecutive championship. Go Lady Bison's! And the numbing fear that this commencement speech will never end. I still think that Albert Einstein must have given the best address ever delivered. He said: "I do not have any particular thoughts to express today, so I wish you all success in the future." And then he sat down. Unfortunately, as you probably suspected, I do have a few thoughts that I wish to pass along to you today.

But I'll try to be brief. In the spirit of "downsizing" that we're doing here in the federal government – I've decided to cut down my list of the top ten best bits of advice to just one. And that's for the Howard Class of '98 to do more than be leaders in your chosen profession. Be good citizens as well. Don't confuse having a career with having a life. They are not the same. And it is your life as a citizen – making a difference in your communities day in and day out – that may offer you your greatest rewards, and be your greatest contributions.

We Americans have a long tradition of being engaged in the broader community. As we kept pressing back the frontiers of this new nation, Americans began forming all kinds of informal associations and institutions – our churches, and civic organizations, and business groups – filled with people who were working not only to build a better future for themselves, but for others as well. When a barn needed to be raised – or a school roof needed to be repaired – everyone pitched in. That's always been the key to our strong and vibrant civil society – and the bedrock of our democracy.

What has always really mattered – particularly in the times of transition and division – is that people have pulled together, and tried to learn the "habits of the heart" – about tolerance, and decency, and respect for people who were different than ourselves.

But what defines a citizen today, in a vastly more complicated, diverse, and fast paced world? What "habits of the heart" does this graduating class need to pass down to your children, who will grow up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – surrounded by technological advances that we can't even imagine today? How do we help our children today to judge their worth not by logos on their shirts but the goodness in their hearts? How do we redefine the role of the individual in a global society that seems to increasingly homogenize our tastes, and yet leaves us searching even harder for our identities? How do we continue to celebrate our own cultures – and respect others – when the competition for resources and opportunities seems to be pitting us increasingly against each other?

But what defines a good citizen today? Voting. Yes. Paying your taxes. Yes. But so much more. Each one of you will have to create your own definitions. Here are a few suggestions I have.

I think you can be a good citizen – and keep your sanity – by leading a balanced life. As Paul Tsongas, the former Senator from Massachusetts said before he died, "Nobody ever says on their death bed, I wish I had spent more time at the office." It may seem impossible to accomplish at certain times in your life, but keeping a balance between family and work, work and friendship; and finding the time for service and your faith. That's the key to a successful life. I should know. So should your own parents, who I know have had to keep their lives – and their bank accounts – in balance, so that you could attend this institution.

I think you can be a good citizen by defying conventional wisdom – and helping to track down the stereotypes that keep us locked in our little worlds. I'm sure that all of you have had moments when your expectations of who someone was – because of what they looked like, or where they were from – were shattered – because you took the time to sit down and talk, or grab a meal together, or share a book. You've had the opportunity to spend the last four years in one of the most diverse settings imaginable – yet I would bet it still takes courage to take that first step, and to put yourself beyond a place of comfort.

These preconceptions and stereotypes also distort how we look at the world around us. As you know, my husband and I just returned from an extraordinary trip to Africa – my second, and his first. We were overwhelmed by the warm, resilient and brilliant people we met in every country we visited – and the spirit of renewal and courage that we saw, as people began to rebuild their communities and their lives. It was also a great source of pride for me as an American, to be accompanied on that trip by many prominent African Americans – from secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater to Rev. Jesse Jackson to Bob Johnson, president of Black Entertainment Television. Like 30 million

other African Americans, their ancestors had been taken from Africa and sentenced to live in bondage. Yet here they were returning as powerful leaders of America, and architects of a new partnership between our two continents.

Yet this trip also underscored for me how so many of America's perceptions of Africa – including my own – have been dominated by misperceptions and conventional thinking. Many people just see pictures of brutal dictatorships. And while that is surely part of the truth – half of the nations in Sub-Saharan Africa now choose their own governments. We see images of famine and poverty. Yet as more countries have embraced economic reforms, income in Africa has more than tripled over the past decade. We see countless pictures of war and conflict. Yet people all over Africa are choosing reconciliation and renewal. So no matter what questions your asking – don't accept the first easy answer. Look with your own eyes.

And finally, I believe that being a good citizen involves taking risks. It's comfortable to play safe – and for students in America today to buy into the "Generation X" label that your generation doesn't care about the future. I don't believe that for a moment. Because every generation has taken risks – whether it was a small band of revolutionaries who decided to fight for independence – or the courageous army of civil rights workers who defied the laws of segregation, and demanded to be full participants in America's promise – or the young people of today – who are working in their communities to build bridges across the racial and economic fault lines that divide us. We know that the best way to learn about the world – and all of its complexities – is not by looking in the mirror.

For the past four years, this university has given you more than a world-class education. It's given you the tools to defy conventional wisdom; the freedom to take risks; the encouragement to get involved; and the opportunity to exchange ideas and share friendships with an extraordinarily diverse group of students and faculty. This university has also been a practice field for the responsibilities and opportunities that come with living in a free society. In other words – the tools you need to be a citizen of this nation – and the world.

So I challenge you – you who are blessed with the talent and intelligence and leadership qualities of your generation, and armed with a world class education – to take those gifts, and transform them into opportunities that benefit yourselves and your families – but also the very well-being of the broader community. As you know, this nation faces some very serious challenges – the widening gap of the have and have nots; the growing number of children growing up in poverty; the crumbling public schools in our inner cities; the stubborn presence of racism and discrimination in our communities. And we need all of you – in whatever capacity you choose – to be engaged in helping to raise up our communities and open up opportunities for all people.

Yet the greatest challenge of all may be to believe – in our hearts – that we can make a difference. Nelson Mandela – on the occasion of his inauguration – recognized our self doubts. "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are all powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us." Don't be afraid of your talents and your gifts. Share them.

But above all – and this is truly my last bit of advice to the class of '98 – have fun. One of America's great musicians, Wynton Marsalis, agrees, "Life is like playing the blues," he says. "So always bring your horn. Know the tune. Learn to listen with empathy. Understand your role in the ensemble. And most of all, enjoy playing."

Congratulations to each one of you – not only for your accomplishments, but also for the promise you hold for your own lives and also for your country. I know you will do much celebrating tonight and over the next few days. But please, don't tell your parents about it.



Commencement'98