

Graduate School of Public and International Affairs
The University of Pittsburgh
Gen. Roscoe Robinson Memorial Lecture on
Diversity and Public Service
by
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The George Washington University
at
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Dean Keeler, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. It is my great honor to be here with you today at the University of Pittsburgh to deliver the Gen. Roscoe Robinson Memorial Lecture at Pitt's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. General Robinson has been a hero of mine since I was a boy. As someone who aspired to a military career, the example of an African-American four-star officer who served his country with distinction was a powerful influence on me – even if he had the misfortune of attending West Point as opposed to Annapolis!

It is particularly fitting that I should be delivering this lecture in February during Black History Month. This important celebration on our national calendar has two purposes. The first is to recall the specific contributions of African-Americans to the history of our country. The second is to understand how the African-American story applies more broadly to our contemporary civic life.

I have attended many Black History Month celebrations over the years. I remember the particular joy of February 1987, celebrating Black History Month with my father's classmates from Morehouse following the first federal recognition of their fellow "Morehouse Man" Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday just weeks before. I recall the pride of Black History Month in February 2009, following the inauguration of Barack Obama, the nation's first black president. And I remember the fun of Black History Month in February 2014 when, as the U.S.

Ambassador to the African Union, I hosted the entire diplomatic corps in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia for an African/African-American music dance party in the U.S. Embassy, where we played everything from Teddy Afro to Teddy Pendergrass – using music to demonstrating the long and enduring links between Africa and America.

I must say frankly, however, that this Black History Month feels different. We have just concluded the most divisive and contentious presidential election in living memory. We have elected a person to the presidency who said a number of things during the campaign that, according to Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, were the “textbook definition of racism.” And we now have a president who is making good on his inaugural promise of “America First” by banning entry into the United States people from seven Muslim majority countries and by stopping refugees admission from anywhere in the world. All

of these developments have caused many people, myself included, to question the commitment of our President and his team to American traditional ideals of equality and our more recent national embrace of diversity.

The world has taken notice. In her speech to the fifty-five assembled African heads of state and government at the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa just last week, outgoing AU Chairperson Dr. Nkosozana Dlamini Zuma said, “It is clear that globally we are entering turbulent times. For example, the very country to whom our people were taken as slaves during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, have now decided to ban refugees from some of our countries.” The United States of America is former slave trading country to which she referred, while the countries affected by the refugee ban to which she alluded were Libya, Somalia and Sudan – all member states of the African Union. The British newspaper *The Independent*

reported yesterday that Iran's Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a sworn enemy of the United States, said in Tehran of President Trump, "We actually thank this new President. We thank him, because he made it easier for us to reveal the real face of the United States. Now, with everything he is doing - [handcuffing a child as young as five at an airport](#) - he is showing the reality of American human rights." And even some of our closest friends are concerned about the turn our newly elected government is taking. In her congratulatory message to President Trump upon his election, German Chancellor Angela Merkel wrote, "Germany and America are connected by values of democracy, freedom and respect for the law and the dignity of man, independent of origin, skin color, religion, gender, sexual orientation or political views," adding: "I offer the next President of the United States close cooperation on the basis of these values." In diplomatic terms, the fact that the head of government of a

long standing ally would have to remind a newly elected U.S. president about the importance of fundamental values of respect for individual dignity is a stunning indication of our current national moment.

Despite these serious concerns, I must say that I emphatically reject the proposition offered by some of my friends on the left that political supporters of President Trump are inherently racist and that, due to his loss of the popular vote and the interference of Russian propaganda in the election, Mr. Trump is not a legitimate president. There are many millions of decent, hard working Americans who do not harbor racial animus and who believe that Donald Trump is the right person to lead our country. Further, absent any evidence of interference with the actual voting processes in our democracy, it is both inaccurate and inappropriate to suggest

that Donald Trump did not legitimately win the presidency, fair and square.

Nevertheless, the tone of Mr. Trump's campaign rhetoric and many of his actions and statements upon assuming the presidency have unleashed something very ugly in our country. It is an ugliness that is contrary to our most basic values. It is an ugliness that must be fought. And in our fight, it is important that we emerge as a stronger country that is both more unified and more committed to uphold our principles of equality, diversity and basic human dignity.

I believe that the story of how African-Americans have struggled for full equality in this country has something to offer in this historical moment. In particular, four important aspects of our generational struggle are worth exploring: faith, perseverance, action and love.

First, faith. While individual African-Americans have adhered to a number of religious traditions, understanding the collective African-American story necessitates understanding the central role of Protestant Christianity in our collective lives. The eleventh chapter of the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament teaches, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” It was faith that kept weary African-American hearts strong through the centuries of slavery and Jim Crow apartheid in the American south. Their faith that, like the biblical Israelites who were also held in bondage, they too would one day taste the freedom that was so brutally denied them by their slave masters. Their faith that, as Dr. King said on a steamy August afternoon on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, their children would be judged not by the color of their skin but the content of their character. And we too, all of us, must hold fast to faith to make it through this

troubling time – faith in our institutions, faith in our ideals and faith in each other. We must have faith that, regardless of our differences over policy and politics, we can recognize and respect our common humanity and our common destiny as Americans.

Second, perseverance. The late great gospel singer Rev. James Cleveland sang a spiritual titled “No ways tired.” A portion of the lyrics say “Nobody told me that the road would be easy, but I don’t believe he brought me this far to leave me.” As troubling as the current state of affairs in our country may be, America has seen darker days in its past. African-Americans know this as much as anyone. We remember when our grandparents feared the burning crosses and the midnight riders clad in white sheets, spreading a particular brand of home-grown terrorism across our communities. We needed no explanation of the lyrics of Billie Holiday’s famous song “Strange Fruit.” And

as we watched the aftermath of the deaths of Emmitt, of Trayvon, of Eric, of Sandra, of Freddie and of so many others, we wondered if the ideal of equal justice under the law would every fully apply to us. And yet, we heeded the admonition of our forbearers “to just keep on keepin’ on.” The lyrics of Rev. Cleveland and the wisdom of our ancestors were their way to tell us about the importance of historical perspective, to urge us to draw strength from the struggles of the past to fight the battles of the present. What is true for African-Americans in this regard is true for us as Americans. When I think of the historical path of our country, of the battles that we have fought and wo, and I reflect on where we are today, I don’t believe that He brought is this far, America, to leave us. We must persevere through this current struggle together.

Third, action. Perseverance does not mean passivity. As Dr. King famously said, the moral arc of the universe is long but it

bends toward justice. Yet it will not bend on its own. It must be forced. This is a lesson that so many Americans learned during the height of the civil rights movement. Men and women, blacks and whites, Jews and gentiles, all engaged in peaceful yet provocative protests from Selma to St. Augustine, from Memphis to Montgomery to demand that, in the words of Dr. King, “America live up to the true meaning of its creed that all men are created equal.” This is history with which many of us are well acquainted. However, I would submit that in the last several months, we made a fundamental mistake. We assumed that once the moral arc is bent in a certain direction, it will stay that way. Instead, we now know that **for the arc to stay bent, we have to stay woke.** So, the current moment puts a challenge to each of us. What will we do to bend the moral arc of our country? How will we make common cause with our fellow Muslim citizens, who feel marginalized, threatened and attacked by an administration they feel is hostile to their very

faith? How will we stand with our brothers and sisters of Mexican descent, who fear the break up of their families by a government intent on putting “America First?” And are we ready to stand shoulder to shoulder with the next community that will feel targeted by the policies and rhetoric of a government that doubts their place in our country? Answering these questions is not merely an academic exercise. Our answers must come in the actions that we take.

Finally, love. To understand the full influence of Dr. King, one must understand that, at his core, he was a preacher, a preacher of the Christian faith. In addition to the belief in the Resurrection, the most important aspect of Christianity is Jesus’s message of radical love. This had its most clear expression from his Sermon on the Mount, in which he urged his followers to “Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who spitefully use you.” It was this

understanding of love that Dr. King had in mind when he spoke of The Beloved Community. This was an idea that we must expand the circle of compassion and acceptance to include those who may be our adversaries today but whom we hope tomorrow will be our compatriots.

I am hopeful that we will get through this difficult historical moment. But I am deeply worried about what our society will look like on the other side. Will we be a country that can debate our policy differences while also recognizing the good-faith motives of those who disagree with us? Or will we demonize our fellow citizens as traitors who do not love America as much as we do, if at all? Will we divide ourselves between those we consider to be real Americans and those we do not, or will we embrace the idea that there are many ways to be an American, to uphold the ideals that are at the core of our national identity? In short, as we struggle to advance American ideals

of diversity, equality and dignity, it matters how we do it. We must do so in a spirit of love, in a manner that expands The Beloved Community, that invites our fellow citizens who may have political differences with us to nevertheless make common cause in upholding the essential dignity of us all. The world is watching what we do. The secret to winning this struggle is love –love of each other and love of America.

Thank you.