

**PRESIDENT H. PATRICK SWYGERT**  
**Howard University 137th Charter Day**  
**March 5, 2004**

**MR. OSSIE DAVIS, CHARTER DAY ORATOR**

**DISTINGUISHED HONOREES**

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**FACULTY**

**STAFF**

**STUDENTS**

**ALL**

**Thank you for joining me here today in celebration of the 137<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Howard University.**

**Longevity, we all know, is not in itself a measure of either excellence or intrinsic worth. A far better test is impact--how much the institution in question has affected its community and to what extent it has advanced the human race. In those regards, we can safely say that Howard University has earned its place among the best of the best. Hence, it is our right and our duty to celebrate today.**

**This Charter Day is a particularly appropriate time to reflect on Howard's rich legacy as well as our vision for the future. This year, along with more than a century of spectacular achievements in so many areas, we are also marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Supreme Court decision on *Brown v. the Board of Education*, the case**

**that led to the desegregation of public education in America. Howard University played a pivotal role in the landmark case which led to a major paradigm shift in the social, political and economic organization of our country.**

**The decision in the case, which would have such far-reaching impact, came after a hard fought battle against centuries of prejudices that were a deeply ingrained part of our national psyche. At the forefront of that battle were the faculty, staff and students of the Howard University School of Law as well as others from various other schools within this university, with support from other institutions across the country.**

**On this Charter Day, let us salute the memory of Charles Houston Hamilton, Thurgood Marshall, the Howard graduate who argued the case in the Supreme Court,**

**James M. Nabrit Jr., William H. Hastie, George E.C. Hayes, Spottswood Robinson, Kenneth Clark and every other member of our community who, half a century ago, fought the fight of their life so that we too could enjoy the benefits of a free society.**

**When the court concluded that separate but equal has no place in public education and that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal, justice and equality scored a victory and bigotry got a well-deserved slap in the face it deserved.**

**According to the *Chicago Defender*, a long-standing African-American newspaper: “Neither the atomic bomb nor the hydrogen bomb will ever be as meaningful to our democracy as the unanimous declaration of the Supreme Court that racial segregation violates the spirit and the letter of our Constitution.”**

**Today, as we recall 1954 and the struggle for equality waged by our forerunners here at Howard, let us rededicate ourselves to the cause of right in this country.**

**Let us pledge to remain vigilant against injustice in whatever form and by so doing, ensure that the past will not repeat itself. Let us move forward in faith and with willingness to do our part in the pursuit of the noble ideals of freedom, justice and equality of opportunities for all.**

**Moreover, as heirs to the Howard legacy, let us look with a somewhat jaundiced eye at the progress that we have made in the fifty years since *Brown*. While we can rejoice in the benefits that have come as a result, we must not be blind to the fact that the struggle continues.**

**We must resist the temptation to be complacent in our pursuit of education as a way of life, and as a path too social progress, for example. We must take seriously the fact that in 2004, the achievement gap between Black and White American students remains wide and glaring. We must take care that we are doing what we need to do, to exploit opportunities when they become available to us.**

**We must do all that we can to ensure, that we are not unwitting partners to re-segregation as the country “sleepwalks” its way to *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Gary Orfield, co-director of the Civil Rights Projects at Harvard said this was the case as more than 80% of Black and Latino segregated high schools are in high-poverty areas, compared with 5% of segregated white schools.**

**At the college level, there are various issues affecting African-American students, not the least among them the growing cost of a college education.**

**We must find a way to make education affordable for those who cannot pay.**

**The imbalance in the female-to-male ratio and the attrition rate among African-American male college students, even at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is a cause for grave concern.**

**Large numbers of males are either not enrolling or not completing college.**

**Overall, while significant progress has been made, African Americans remain disproportionately poor and socially disadvantaged.**

**As we reflect on the legacy of Howard University and on the legacy of *Brown*, I sincerely hope that we too have the vision to look ahead and the courage to do our part to fulfill our responsibility to future generations.**

**To this end, we must see *Brown* simply as a guide to our ultimate destination which is just and harmonious society. It is up to us to heed the urgent imperative to do our part to help design a structure with the capacity to take us in that direction. Unless we can do that the legacy of *Brown* will remain purely in the realms of idealism and unfinished business.**

**Thank you.**