

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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I suppose that I would not violate protocol if I were to call the names of all distinguished people assembled before beginning my remarks; however, you know that whenever this many people have on black robes and hoods and hats, that they all feel distinguished. And, I think it would save a little bit of time for me to simply say to everyone who feels distinguished, "Good Morning."

.... listening to America--listening, listening, listening. I have not come here, graduates, to wish you well. Someone else can do that -- your parents, the faculty here at Hampton. They will wish you well -- because they have pride and satisfaction in your achievement. So do I, but I will not offer you good wishes. I have come instead to hear your voices, to listen to your music. I have not heard your music for the last four years. There was a time not long ago when you were heard -- sometimes too stridently, sometimes with just cause, sometimes in mindless anger but you were heard -- just a few years ago.

Question: Why have you become so silent? Why? Why have you denied me the opportunity to hear your voices, to hear your music and listen to your dreams? Why?, are you so quiet? Are you afraid to speak up? Maybe. I've listened to everybody else. I've heard business groups, labor groups, special interest groups (many of them were talking in an order to advance their own self interest, some of them allegedly desire to advance the public good), community groups, countless individuals coming to Washington to lobby for their interest. But, where were you? I have not heard from you. I would like to have your advice. I would like to hear your voice. But I only want to hear your voice if you have something to say. If you have nothing to say, remain silent.

That would be my advice. But I really have come here today to try to develop some sense of the future, to find out whether you have the capacity to extend your interests beyond your own careers. For me it is important. / It is important to discover whether you will raise your voices for the common good or whether you will join the chorus of those who are looking out for their own interests. We are victims right now in Washington, D.C., of men and women who make no music and have no dreams. What will become of the future? To a certain extent I can understand why you have become so quiet and introspective. I can understand why you would adhere to the new pragmatism. I sympathize with your dilemma. Life has become very serious and complicated. The job market is tight, and it is discriminating more instead of less. The government is so big and so insensitive that it is run by politicians and bureaucrats, and some people say those politicians and bureaucrats are at best inept and at worst crooks. (applause) The last politician that declared that he wasn't a crook is now in exile. (applause) The enormity, the enormity, the bigness of the problems confronting us overwhelms us. We try to define and re-define the answer. We re-define the problem. But we are not really in search of an answer. Progress comes slowly. We need that. (applause) We need a leader in this country with a positive vision of the future. We need that. (applause) You have my sympathy, graduates, because you see, I can present to you no heroes -- heroes against whom to measure yourselves, because heroes have joined the twilight era. The government is in jeopardy because some of our citizens refuse to participate in their government. Some people have withdrawn from participation in public life. That's the supreme copout. Withdrawal is not the answer. You cannot afford that kind of luxury. The government is to be discredited, alright, but people must find solutions to the problems of government. Those who seek safety in complacency fail to

understand that progress of the last decade did not occur simply because there were people who sat down and said, "We are dissatisfied." Milestones in the field of civil rights -- Brown vs. the Board; the Civil Rights Act of '64; the Voting Rights Act of '65, -- all of these things were reached when men like Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther king, Roy Wilkins, when they decided to translate the private unhappiness of millions of people into public issues. That's when things changed. The more we can understand that, the better off we will be. They know the true meaning of Robert Kennedy's words when he said, "The real point about sacrifice, except in time of open warfare, is surely that it tends to be undramatic, prolonged, and irritating. What happened to you four years ago is that you failed to bring the necessary capacity to maintain a sustained effort for ultimate victory. It takes courage and commitment and a willingness to stick to it a long time in order to ^{gain} ultimate success. But you got tired of maintaining the effort. You said it's not worth the time that you need to devote in order to bring about a peaceful world, equal justice before the law, and so you quit. It is incumbent upon all of us to understand that we are the only ones who can activate solutions to problems. It is incumbent upon all of us to understand that we need to participate in the government at all levels -- federal, state, and local. Perhaps you say, "I will just withdraw because no harm will come to me if I don't participate in my government on any level." Well, you may think no harm will come to you, but decisions which affect your lives are going to be made whether you choose to participate or not. They will be made. And you will have to buy them. (applause) Many of these decisions will be made whether you choose to participate: a state government can tax your earnings, the zoning board can zone an area so that you will not be able to live where you want to live. The state legislature can limit its aid to

a state university and therefore limit the access to education of quality for many children. Local school districts can deny your children the kind of education you think they ought to have, whether you participate or not. All of that can happen. We are now entering what I call a critical time of choices because we are lately aware that the resources of the federal government are not unlimited. We must make critical choices about what the government should do and what it should not do. What makes the choice of the future so critical for you is that it will be a choice between right versus right, and not the usual choice of right versus wrong. The public consensus needs to be developed. Agreement about how to divide these resources ought to be reached in an aura of reality. As we develop this consensus we must understand that many of the problems we have are common problems even though we don't all look alike. When you find a black unemployed worker standing in the unemployment line, he's angry because his government has not cured his unemployment problem and has pursued policies which relegated him to the realm of statistics. He is the same as the white unemployment worker standing in the line with him. That mother -- black mother -- sending her child to school in fear, wondering whether the child will get what he goes to the schoolhouse to get is not different from that white mother who sends her child to school wanting the best available. All I'm saying is: There is a commonality of situation. Where black people are concerned there is a very particular emphasis that must be placed on the plight of the black. Nothing was ever done by simply sitting on the back of the bus and watching the rest of the world go by. (applause) Equality can be achieved but it must be achieved through actively participating in the social and the political process. You have to do that. You can't afford to do less than that. If you find a child who cannot read and write, if you don't teach that child to read and write, what have you denied to the

child? You have denied that child the right to participate in public debate because he can't read and he can't write, so how can he participate in the public debate? If you don't help a person to fulfill their constitutional prerogative to vote, what have you done to that person? You have denied that person the right to participate in making basic public decisions. You've denied that person a public voice. It may be interesting to you to know that there are over 53 million people in the United States who are not registered to vote. Six million, 419 thousand of these people are black. They voluntarily choose not to have a public voice. If you don't participate in the affairs of your federal, state and local government, you may discover that once you decide to participate, it's too late. Your rights have been abrogated and nobody wants to hear anything you have to say. Ralph Ellison's invisible man realized in the end that he had over stayed his hibernation -- that even an invisible man has a social responsibility. It is time for you to make some music. It is time for you to dream again, unless you have forgotten how. There is no need for you to try to conjure up new myths, new slogans -- the old ones will suffice.

It may be necessary, or it may not be necessary to hear the stamp of marching feet again. All I know is that I for one will be listening for a better America as you make the music. Don't disappoint me.

Rep. Barbara Jordan