

Ambassador Barry Wells' speech

I am honoured to be here today. I want to especially thank the University of The Gambia for their generous invitation to be part of the Chancellor's Lecture Series. I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the members of the Board who have continuously pursued an agenda of academic excellence for the students of this institution. Your efforts are lauded and I congratulate you for setting an example of academic pride and excellence for institutions all over West Africa.

The University of The Gambia was established only 8 years ago, but has already graduated hundreds of young men and women who will go on to be doctors, lawyers, officers, professors, artists, scientists and scholars. In short, they are the future leadership of this country. The Government of The Gambia should be commended for investing in its people and ensuring the provision of high quality university education to its citizenry, making a declaration to the world that it upholds the importance of education. It serves a clear reflection of President Jammeh's commitment to the future of this country.

For those of you who are graduating, this is not end of your education, but the beginning. The value of education is priceless. You have equipped yourselves with the tools and skills needed to become meaningful contributors to society. Knowledge is the training of the human mind, but application of that knowledge requires education. That is, the actual thinking and use of judgement that make us a successful functioning part of a community. Education is an essential foundation of the social and economic development of a nation. As such, education played a significant role in American Civil Rights Movement, about which I will discuss in more detail.

Education and the Civil Rights Movement

The barriers facing African-Americans after the Civil War were numerous, especially in the South. Jim Crow Laws such as Literacy Tests and Grandfather Clauses kept them from voting in many southern states. Further, the Supreme Court ruled that separate facilities, if they provided the same service, were legal and therefore blacks could legally be forced to ride in separate rail cars and attend different schools than whites. Of course, in practice separate was never equal and the schools for black students were never given resources as those for white students. It was impossible for blacks to achieve equality in this atmosphere. The injustice and hardships that African-Americans faced were overwhelming and eventually sparked the Civil Rights Movement.

Before the Civil War, higher education for black students was virtually non-existent. The few who did receive schooling often studied in informal and sometimes hostile settings, or were forced to teach themselves entirely.

Southern white strongly opposed the education of blacks was only slightly more common in the North. In the late 19th century, some colleges for black students were started in box cars and church basements.

Slavery divided Americans from their very first day of independence. The Quakers of Pennsylvania very nearly refused to agree to the constitution because it did not outlaw slavery, which they saw as an evil that violated their core religious principles. Most of the northern states abolished slavery quickly. However, the South's more agrarian society grew more dependent on a new staple crop - "King Cotton" - and on the slave-intensive plantation that cultivated it. Thus the prospect of a clash with increasingly antislavery northern states grew, particularly as they sparred over whether new states and territories in the West would allow slavery or not. However, America delayed that conflict with series of political compromises that preserved the union and kept slavery from spreading, but did nothing for the plight of African-American slaves in the South.

The United States' declaration of Independence (1776) includes stirring language on universal brotherhood: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." However, that guarantee of liberty was not extended to slaves. Many of those slaves, of course, came from West Africa, including The Gambia.

The same debate arose at the Constitutional Convention. While many of the delegates were actually abolitionist in their views, the primary concern for many of them was establishing a strong, unified government to pursue independence. Because any proposed constitution would not take effect until ratified by 9 of the 13 states, it became necessary to reach a compromise on slavery and the status of the African-American slaves.

Northern delegates to the convention, led by James Wilson of Pennsylvania, reached an agreement with three large slaveholding states. Both sides agreed that every five "unfree persons" - slaves - would count as three people when calculating the size of a state's congressional delegation.

Hence the infamous reference to "3/5's of a man." Although the US political system proved unable to dislodge slavery from American South, it did not go unchallenged, determined women and men-blacks and whites-used their minds and devoted their lives to the cause of abolition, the legal prohibition of slavery. They employed an array of tactics, both violent and non-violent. And just as in Martin Luther King's day, the pen and the appeal to conscience would prove powerful weapons. The stirring words of African-American and white thinkers forced increasing numbers of their countrymen to confront the contradiction between their noble ideals and the lives of bondage imposed on black Americans in the South.

Perhaps the most powerful voice belonged to Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave, journalist, publisher, and champion of liberty. Douglass was born into slavery in either 1817 or 1818. His mother taught him to read in defiance of a Maryland State law intended to keep the slave population docile. At age 13, he purchased his first book, a collection of essays, poems and dialogues, extolling liberty that was widely used in ear-

ly 19th century American schoolrooms.

From these youthful studies, Douglass began to hone the skills that would make him one of the country's most powerful and effective orators. In 1838, Douglass escaped from the plantation and arrived in Massachusetts, where he would launch a remarkable career.

During this same time period, the debates on slavery reached a fever pitch with series of debates staged throughout the state of Illinois between Abraham Lincoln, who was challenging for a Senate seat, and incumbent Stephen A. Douglas, in which Lincoln argued powerfully against the spread of slavery. Although Lincoln lost the election to Douglas, the debates were heavily covered by the media, and brought Lincoln into national prominence, enabling his election two years later to the presidency.

Lincoln's election in 1860 sparked the American Civil War, as Southern states, afraid that Lincoln would move to outlaw slavery, sought to secede from the United States and form their own government. Ironically, Lincoln likely would not have attempted to outlaw slavery if the war had not occurred, as he knew such a move would tear the nation apart. The war raged for more than four years, and more than 600,000 Americans died. This the official rallying cry of the northern forces was to preserve the union, not to end slavery.

Nonetheless, while the North's victory in that war and the subsequent Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution did end the institution of slavery in the United States, it did not end injustice against African-Americans. During the years that followed the North punished the South during the period of Reconstruction, during which political rights of white southerners were reduced, and many of their affairs were run by northerners.

In response, state government in the South adopted segregationist laws mandating separation of the races in nearly every aspect of everyday life. They required separate public schools, railroad cars, and public libraries; separate water fountains, restaurants and hotels. This system became known informally as "Jim Crow." From the 1828 minstrel show song "Jump Jim Crow," which was typically performed by white performers in black-face as a caricature of the "inferior" black man.

Jim Crow could not have existed had the federal courts interpreted broadly the relevant constitutional protections. But the judicial branch instead seized upon technicalities and loopholes to avoid striking down segregationist laws.

In 1875, Congress enacted what would be the last civil rights law for nearly a century. Louisiana had adopted a law requiring separate rail cars for whites, blacks and coloureds of mixed ancestry. An international group of citizens who opposed the law persuaded Homer Plessy, a public education advocate with a white complexion and a black-grandmother, to test the law. Plessy purchased a ticket for a "whites-only" rail car. After taking his seat, Plessy revealed his ancestry to the train conductor. He was arrested, and the litigation began. In 1896, the case reached the US Supreme Court.

In a seven-to-one decision, the court upheld the Louisiana law. "The enforced separation of the races," did not, majority ruled, "stamp the coloured race with a badge of inferiority." Thus the high court lent its prestige to what became known as "separate but equal" segregation.

The failure of Reconstruction and the rise of legal segregation forced African-Americans to make difficult choices. The overwhelming majority still lived in the South and faced fierce, even violent resistance to civil equality. Led by Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), some argued for focusing on black economic development. Others, including most prominently the leading scholar and intellectual, (WEB) Du Bois, insisted upon an uncompromising effort to achieve the voting and other civil rights promised by the Constitution and its postwar amendments. Booker T. Washington attended what is today's Hampton University in South-Eastern Virginia, excelled at his studies, and found work as a schoolteacher. In 1881 he was offered the opportunity to head a new school for African-Americans in Macon County, Alabama. Washington had concluded that practical skills and economic independence were the keys to black advancement. He decided to ground his new school (now known as Tuskegee University) in industrial education. Male students learned skills such as carpentry and blacksmithing, females typically studied nursing or dressmaking. Tuskegee also trained school-teachers to staff African-American schools throughout the South. This approach promised to develop economically productive black citizens without forcing the nation to confront squarely the civil rights question. A number of leading philanthropists, such as the oil magnate, John D. Rockefeller, provided funds to the school. The school grew in size, reputation, and prestige.

Many blacks turned for leadership to the social scientist WEB Du Bois (1868-1963). A graduate of Fisk University, a historically black institution in Nashville, Tennessee, Du Bois earned a PhD in history from Harvard University and took up a professorship at Atlanta University. Du Bois authored and edited a number of scholarly studies, depicting black life in America. Social science, he believed, would provide the key to improving race relations. But as legal segregation, and illegal racist acts such as lynching of young black men took hold throughout the South, Du Bois gradually concluded that only direct political agitation and persistence could advance African-American civil rights.

Du Bois and a number of leading black intellectuals formed the Niagara Movement, a civil rights organisation squarely opposed to Washington's policies of accommodation and gradualism. The Niagara group held a notable 1906 conference at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, site of John Brown's failed slave-rebellion. They lobbied against Jim Crow laws, distributed pamphlets and circulars; and attempted generally to raise the issues of civil rights and racial justice. But the movement was not very successful. Du Bois continued to write, cementing a reputation as one of the century's

major American thinkers. He emerged as a leading anti-colonialist and expert on Africa history.

It is important to understand that the modern civil rights movement rested on two pillars. One was formed by the brave non-violent protesters who forced their fellow Americans at last to confront squarely the scandalous treatment of black Americans, and the second consisted of attorneys such as Charles Hamilton Houston and his greatest student, Thurgood Marshall, who ensured that those protestors would have the United States' most powerful force-the law of the land - on their side. Marshall, the attorney who argued for Montgomery's blacks in 1956, relied on legal precedents he had established in other successful court cases. Brown V Board of education was the most celebrated, but even before Brown, the partnership between Houston and Marshall had dismantled much of the legal structures by which the American South had enforced its Jim Crow system of race segregation.

Charles Hamilton Houston was born in 1895 in Washington, DC. A brilliant student, he graduated as a valedictorian from Amherst College at the age of 19, then served in a segregated US Army unit during the First World War. Returning home, he was determined to make the fight for civil rights his life's work. He studied law at Harvard University, becoming the first African-American editor of its prestigious law review. He would go on to earn a PhD at Harvard and a doctor of civil law degree at the University of Madrid in Spain.

In 1924, Houston began teaching part time at Howard University Law School, in Washington, DC. By 1935 Houston was running the law school, had radically improved the education of African-American law students, earned full accreditation for the school, and produced a group of lawyers, expert in civil rights cases.

Case by case, Marshall and the NAACP attorneys chipped away at the legal pillars upholding segregation. In all, Marshall won an astounding 29 of the 32 cases he argued before the Supreme Court, a court he went on to join in 1967, going on to serve on the Supreme Court for more than 25 years, becoming one of the most influential jurists in American history.

"No other American did more to lead our country out of the wilderness of segregation than Thurgood Marshall," said his fellow Supreme Court justice, Lewis Powell.

Even as African-Americans fought for their civil rights, their individual accomplishment demonstrated the justice of their cause. The achievements of the Nobel Prize-winning scholar and international official, Ralph Bunche, demonstrated to all fair-minded people that black Americans could contribute fully to American society.

Ralph Bunche was born in Detroit, Michigan, on August 7, 1903. He graduated with honours from the University of California at Los Angeles and continued as graduate student on scholarship at Harvard University.

From his earliest years, Bunche was acutely conscious of racial discrimination and was determined to work against it. His studies of colonial Africa persuaded him that colonialism has much in common with racial discrimination in the United States. He was determined to help put an end to both. Bunche set up the Political Science Department at Howard University, in Washington, DC. His many articles on racial discrimination later became basic literature for the US civil rights movement. Bunche also pioneered the study of colonialism in the United States. He was chief associate and co-writer of the Swedish social economist, Gunnar Myrdal, whose landmark 1944 study of US race relations, *An American Dilemma*, was cited approvingly by the US Supreme Court in its *Brow V Board of education* decision.

As the Second World War loomed, Bunche was recruited by the US government to advise on Africa, and then transferred to the State Department to work on the future United Nations charter. He was the first black official in the state department. At the San Francisco conference in 1945, he drafted two chapters of the charters, on non-self-governing territories (colonies) and on the trusteeship system. These chapters provided the basis for accelerating decolonization after the war. Bunche did as much as anyone to hasten the end of colonialism.

The Civil Rights movement marked the emergence of Martin Luther King Jr. - the inspirational leader who mobilised millions, held them to the high moral standard of non-violent resistance, and built bridges between Americans of all races, creeds, and colours. While many brave activists contributed to the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, it was King who, more than any other individual, forced millions of white Americans to confront directly the reality of Jim Crow - and shaped the political reality in which the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 could become law.

From MLK to Obama

The 45th anniversary of the Dr King's most memorable speech coincided with the day when another African-American leader, Barack Obama, made a historic speech of his own - accepting the Democratic Party's nomination for President of the United States in 2008.

Martin Luther King had a dream. He spoke of an America where people "would be judged not by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character." We watched his dream make a tremendous strike forward during the 2008 presidential elections. In many ways, the nation that President Obama leads is visibly less divided along racial line than that of Martin Luther King.

In those days, racial inequality was legally sanctioned: separate parks, restrooms, hotels, theatres, schools and drinking fountains were common in many areas; I lived those days as a youngster growing up in Columbus, Ohio. On Sundays after church, my friends, and cousins would walk downtown to the RKO Place theatre and it was a palace! Buying our tickets we were directed to the balcony to watch show. It would be much later than I understood our parents' guidance to be certain to sit only in the balcony - as blacks were

allowed on the main floor. Statute forbade interracial marriage and dating, African-Americans suspected, frequently on the flimsiest of evidence, of violating these status were beaten and lynched, sometimes with tacit public approval and even enjoyment.

I can still see the photo in *Jet* magazine in 1955 - Emmitt "Bo" Till, a black 14 year old Chicago teen, lying battered and disfigured beyond recognition in his casket. I was 13 at the time. While visiting relatives in Mississippi, Till was accused of whistling at a white woman. The truth of which was never verified. Abducted from his uncle's house at night, he was beaten and shot to death and his lifeless body thrown into the river. His known murderers were never brought to justice-at least not in this life. The federal interventions of the '60s - the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, Federal Fair Housing Act - reset the nation's parameters for "normalcy."

Since then, the Jim Crow laws have been struck down and segregation has been outlawed in all public venues. Discrimination, however, though it may have diminished and changed its form, still exists in some ways.

America and the world owe a great debt to Dr King and all those who used themselves, used their talents and their education to pick conscience of a nation to confront the need for change.

Just as education gave these pioneers for justice, from Frederick Douglass to Barack Obama, tools and the will to affect social change, is there any doubt that applying one's education can effect the social economic development of a nation? There is no magic solution to end poverty in the world, but the closest thing we can do to help take it a step in that direction is to provide a minimum basic education for all.

During the World Education forum held in Dakar in April 2000, the international community underscored the need to eradicate extreme poverty and gave its collective commitment to work towards this aim through education. Subsequently, the United Nations General Assembly declared the period 1997 to 2006 as the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. The role of education in poverty eradication, in close co-operation with other social sectors, is crucial.

The report made by the Secretary-General of the United Nations within the context of the Decade for the Eradication of Poverty confirms that universal primary education is central to the fight against poverty.

According to a report issued by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation, an adult with a primary education earns twice as much as an adult without any schooling.

In Nigeria, the incidence of poverty is 70 per cent in households headed by adults with no education, compared to 56 per cent for households headed by adults who've been to primary school. (OXFAM)

In Uganda, four years of primary education raises a farmer's output by 7 per cent.

Education affects quality of life: Children of mothers who have been to school are healthier, better nourished, and more likely to attend and succeed in school than children those of mothers who have never gone to school.

In the Philippines, maternal primary education reduces the risk of child mortality by half and secondary education by a factor of three. (From "Education Now: Break the Cycle of Poverty", OXFAM).

Education helps to prevent the labour, trafficking and sexual exploitation of children, and their use as soldiers. Education is one of the most effective weapons against HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and raises awareness of living conditions and environmental protection.

Life expectancy rises by as much as 2 years for every 1 per cent increase in literacy.

Conclusion

I believe education is one of the most important inherent rights and powerful tools for change in the world, and a key to the world's advancement. It is a gift that can never be taken from you. It is a gift that many will never receive. It is said that to whom much is given, much is required. What will you do with this gift? For with it comes responsibility to your family to your country, to you selves. You should all be commended for taking your education seriously and making a commitment to yourselves to be that next pioneer for justice and a better life for your fellow Gambians.

By investing in your education you are ultimately investing in yourselves and in the future of your country. A quote from the book *Monk's Reflections* by Edward Malloy, says that a college degree is not a sign that one is a finished product but an indication a person is prepared for life.

The question you should ask yourselves is how well have I prepared myself? I encourage you to think of your education as preparation for the rest of your life.

In an excerpt from his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama warned about not having purpose and sitting idly by. He called for people not to be dismayed by the obstacles in their paths, but rather to move forward with hope and energy. He says: "It's the hope of slaves, sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a millwork's son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope!" This is a powerful message that challenges you all to look within yourselves to define the purpose of your education, the purpose of your lives.

Do not sit idly by and wait for your community to improve itself or offer you a better life. Education is just one tool to help you make a difference. The rest is up to you. Thank you!