

The True State of Black America

Toward a Just and Peaceful World

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Congratulations proud young graduates!

You have accomplished an important milestone in your lives. Important for who you are and where you are.

You are young, gifted, and black. And you are graduates of The University of California at Berkeley--America's campus--with a legacy of informed action and deliberate dissent.

I want to ask each of you today to consider the current state of America. Under President Bush the US has turned its back on the United Nations and the entire international community and has waged war in Afghanistan and Iraq; more potential conflicts are threatened with nations like Iran, Syria, North Korea, and even China. Here at home, unemployment is rising, our economy is on its knees, and our national debt is threatening to reach unprecedented levels. The word "deflation" is whispered by many economists.

In better days students graduated from college practically debt-free. No longer.

More families than ever before try to relieve the mounting pressure by depleting their savings and becoming more in debt. Yet, the President advocates more tax cuts, not for poor America, but for the rich.

Only this week we learn that in this country one million black children now live in poverty and that one million black men and women are in prison. Every night on the streets of America, over a quarter of a million veterans sleep as our forgotten homeless. That's the thanks of a grateful nation.

Special interests have taken control of our nation's capital and are perverting it from the noble traditions of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Kennedy, and instead are using our precious national resources for personal profit and personal needs.

In 1953 Dwight Eisenhower, warned of failing to address the pressing social needs of the nation in deference to an uncontrolled arms build up. He said:

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron."

You, here today, graduate from an institution with a long and noble history of fighting to protect the interests of our nation.

In the early 1930s and '40s the issues that sparked Berkeley's activism ranged from labor rights and the Spanish Civil War to the draft. In the halcyon days of the '60s and '70s the issues ranged from the right, itself, to dissent on campus to the Vietnam War.

Whether the issues were near or far, civil rights at home or human rights abroad, we, who lived in other parts of the country where such activism couldn't easily be expressed, could count on you at Berkeley to be there, to speak for us. And sometimes even to think for us.

Above all, your graduation from Berkeley is a signal to everyone around the world, that more than anything else, you can think and are prepared to fight for what is right.

And so, no matter what you do or where you go in life, let no one deny you the right to think for yourself.

And no wonder. In the face of the corporate media package that is presented to us as "news," it is now imperative that you learn to see the invisible, hear the unspoken, and read the unwritten.

Or else, you will not know the truth.

Only this week we've learned from the BBC News that the entire "Saving Private Lynch in Iraq" episode was staged by the US military. On advice from PR spinmeisters, the Pentagon ignored efforts by Iraqi doctors to return Private Lynch in an Iraqi ambulance. Instead, according to the BBC, the Pentagon fired on the ambulance so they could then stage a rescue and stage a firefight at the hospital and remove Private Lynch. This was all done to galvanize the American people to support the war. If this BBC revelation is true, it shows us the extent to which our government will lie to us.

But we should understand that the Bush Administration is not alone in deceiving us.

I'm a parent.

And today, I put myself in the place of all the parents, relatives, and friends who are in the audience today. I am proud of you. I am one of you. But let me quickly acknowledge that the achievements of these young people belong very much to your, too. For it is seldom that we accomplish anything significant in life, alone.

Parents, relatives, and friends, you gave birth to this moment, with your profound nurturing and unconditional love.

Forgive me if I shed a tear of joy myself. This day signals to me that hope is not over and with each one of you, a new day of opportunity dawns for all of us. And that my son--and all black America's sons--still have a chance to make it in our America.

It's a tough world out there. And America is a tough neighborhood too. You've got to be strong.

Our president tells us that we are now engaged in a war that will last for the rest of my life.

He says that for the next generation or more, we Americans must be prepared to fight any foe who is inclined to harm us. And for the Bush Administration, that means conflicts with some 60 nations of the world.

He says that we must be prepared to invoke this Bush Doctrine of preemptive strike and regime change whenever and wherever we need it. And his Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld tells us that our military must be prepared to seize foreign capitals and occupy them.

To accomplish this, according to the Administration, we will need a larger military. That military must have usable nuclear weapons and the billions it will take to deploy a national missile defense must be spent. In addition, some in the Administration insist that our military must control space and cyberspace and that advanced technologies be utilized for military applications.

The Bush Administration has a blueprint for the world that will be of their making. But as an American, it will be done with your blessing--and in your name.

For the first time since the founding of our country, our nation's foreign policy blueprint calls for global military domination--an "American Century."

Rebuilding America's Defenses, prepared by the Project for the New American Century, listed 27 people as having attended meetings or contributed papers in preparation of the report. Significantly, among them are six who have key positions in the George W. Bush Administration:

Paul Wolfowitz, deputy defense secretary at the Pentagon; John Bolton, undersecretary of state for arms control and international security; Eliot Cohen, Defense Policy Board; I. Lewis Libby, the vice president's chief of staff; and Dov Zakheim, chief financial officer for the Pentagon.

Upon a closer examination of the PNAC documents, it is clear that a shift in US behavior of unimagined proportions is taking place right before our very eyes.

John F. Kennedy had a similar choice before him. Either launch a first strike against a much smaller, poorer, neighboring country or negotiate a diplomatic resolution to the Cuban Missile Crisis. As we now know, JFK, advised by his brother Bobby, decided that America was not worthy of what he called a "Pearl Harbor in reverse." Bobby Kennedy felt that a first strike against Cuba was not consistent with American values. He said, "For 175 years, we have not been that kind of country."

In a subsequent speech at American University on June 10, 1963, President John Kennedy revealed his thinking on the place of the United States in the world and its role in preserving world peace. Not arrogant and flush with power from success in overcoming the Missile Crisis, he said, "What kind of peace do I mean and what kind of a peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war, not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace--the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living--and the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and build a better life for their children--not merely peace for Americans, but peace for all men and women--not merely peace in our time but peace in all time."

Even George Washington, over a century earlier, recommended that the United States conduct its foreign policy as "our interest, guided by our justice" directs. In his 1796 Farewell Address, offered specific advice to America and its conduct in international affairs. He cautioned against passionate attachments to foreign countries and warned against militarism. Yet the very priorities as outlined by the current advisors to our current President, go against the very cautions and concerns that both George Washington and John F. Kennedy expressed.

You no doubt are looking at the direction in which your lives will now turn. Grad school, starting a business, taking a year off to see the world, or your choice of jobs with companies and organizations big and small: all this lies before you.

But how can you navigate with conscience a terrain that is littered with the remains of those who sacrificed themselves before you, but who now seem like a distant memory?

In other words, how can you know the direction of the elders unless you are fully connected to them?

As you may know, I dedicated my time in Congress trying to understand and eliminate the fundamental causes of the disparities that plague black America. But of course, in order to eliminate them, it is first necessary to understand them.

So I asked fundamental questions about black America, America, Africa, and the world.

I wondered why it is that the African American community lacked strong and forceful leadership that could demand and negotiate on its behalf in the world of American politics. And why was it that people who thought like me had such a hard time and blacks who didn't care as much about our community seemed to rise and be propelled throughout the political system.

The answer to that question took me to the Counterintelligence program of the FBI and its aim to destroy, discredit, or otherwise neutralize black leadership in America. Now, those aren't my words, they are the words of the FBI. From there, it's just a short line to asking why Geronimo Pratt spent 27 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit, rather than in the US Congress where he could have made a better America for all of us.

So I held a forum in the Congress on COINTELPRO and US political prisoners.

After finding a CIA document that actually mentions assassination and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., dated May 11, 1965, some 3 years before his murder, I held a forum in the Congress on The Murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I wondered why Africa seemed to be in turmoil, and so I began to investigate US involvement on the Continent. That led me to the murder of Patrice Lumumba as a model for the systematic destabilization of the Continent and the theft of its resources by a small brigand of outlaws who have legal and illegal weapons at their disposal to create so-called rebel groups that materialize from out of nowhere and have instant access to press conferences and international airwaves. So I held a forum in Congress: Covert Action in Africa, Smoking Gun in Washington, DC.

I wondered out loud why Tupac was murdered and why we don't have any clues as to who did it.

But understanding how the Black Panthers were targeted in their heyday, I wondered if the fact that Tupac's mom was a Black Panther and his father figure a black activist contributed to certain death threats against Tupac's life that were being investigated by the FBI. So I decided to have a Hip Hop event in Georgia and one in DC to explore these and other issues of Hip Hop as a political movement--infiltrated and cut short.

I wondered why it was that the statistics could reflect worsening conditions for black America and very few people actually know it. So I began to publicize the State of Black America.

* that the AIDS infection rate for black men is 5 times higher than for white men and 15 times higher for black women than for white women;

* that African Americans now account for 41% of all US AIDS cases;

* that despite the higher incidence of breast cancer for white women, black women actually die at a rate 69% higher than white women;

* that black women are at greater risk of dying from every pregnancy-related cause of death reported than white women;

* that the ratio of black men in prison to those in higher education is 4 to 1. And between 1980 and 1995, the increase in incarceration for black men was 20 times greater than their enrollments in colleges and universities.

Only this week, University of California regents went on record in opposition to fellow regent Ward Connerly's campaign to stop state and local agencies from collecting race data. How can Ward Connerly defend such a position in the face of these numbers?

And sadly, the majority of white Americans questioned in a Harvard University Washington Post survey found that in some cases, whites believed that blacks were actually better off than them.

Even more disappointing, some black people would have you and me be ashamed to talk about the true state of black America. And if we don't talk about it, who will we know about our conditions, and how will anyone who can help us know that we need help or even how to help?

And believe me, there are people who do want to help us.

So, given my desire to view these intractable problems and their solutions, it wasn't difficult for me to see that new legislation emanating from the White House would mean a significant debasement of our hard-earned civil rights and liberties.

And when the Armed Services Committee voted to support legislation that funded the War on Terrorism, but that also allowed US police and US military to work together, I had to vote no and let the American people know that we were drifting backwards toward the mistakes of COINTELPRO.

And finally, as I researched more and more of the facts surrounding September 11th, it was incomprehensible to me that an intelligence failure of such magnitude could result in no one in the Bush Administration either being punished or accepting responsibility for such a tragedy. Then I began to delve into the information, some of which has become known today. I learned from the Sydney Morning Herald, Ha'aretz, and even <CNN.com> that much more was known about the tragic events of September 11, and that's when I asked the question "What did the Bush Administration know and when did it know it about the events of September 11th?"

And because of the voting debacle in Florida that robbed blacks and Latinos of their right to vote and have that vote counted, it was clear that this Administration had embarked on a path that constituted a fundamental shift of epic proportions and was doing it on a foundation of questionable and uncertain legitimacy.

I had no choice but to use publicly available information and hold this Administration accountable.

However, in my last election, Republicans recruited a black Republican to run in the Democratic Primary. 47,000 white Republicans then hijacked the Democratic Primary and voted in it instead of in their own Primary. Democrats and Blacks voted for me; whites and Republicans voted for my opponent.

My opponent now represents you in the United States Congress.

There's so much I haven't mentioned to you today. There's so much to know.

One thing we do know: This isn't the America of my mother and father.

My father was arrested in South Carolina, still in his Army uniform having just arrived from Europe at the end of World War II, for drinking water from the white water fountain. He and his buddies spent time in jail because they dared to test at home the freedom that they had just won for Europe.

Later, while pregnant with me, my mother was nearly beaten by a rural Georgia sheriff who brought a bicycle chain to teach the uppity black woman who would dare to ask to use the public restroom at the local gas station a lesson.

Luckily my father brought a gun to that fight and she used the restroom; the sheriff apologized for the misunderstanding, and my parents went on their way.

This is not that America.

But this is an America where not a single US Senator or Governor comes home to our community.

And where, in spite of Florida, important provisions of the Voting Rights Act expire in 2007.

And I will end with this: On page 60 of The Project for a New Century report, Rebuilding America's Defenses, the author writes:

"[A]dvanced forms of biological warfare that can 'target' specific genotypes may transform biological warfare from the realm of terror to a politically useful tool."

Now, I don't know what they meant by that bit of advice. But I do know that such research has been conducted already, according to news reports, in Israel and in apartheid South Africa. At home, I do know that the US Government has been sued by the son of Paul Robeson for Robeson's targeting by the CIA's MK Ultra Program; and the Tuskegee Study which for 40 years targeted black men who thought they were being treated by their government and who, instead, were being studied by it.

Steeped in the intergenerational dialog that allows us all to be students in wonderment of how much we can accomplish when we love one another, stand up for one another, defy conventional wisdom with one another. A new possibility can be created.

We've seen it happen before. From the Africans who passed through that portal of no return, to the Maroons who escaped slavery high in the Jamaican mountains, to the workers on the South American latifundias. Our story has been written by our resistance.

College students in Greensboro, North Carolina wrote the page on sit-ins at lunch counters across the South; they all contributed to the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

Young black children facing dogs and fire hoses began the chapter on harassment, threats, intimidation, and death; four little girls blown to bits in church don't even end that chapter; agitation for the right to vote contributed to the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

Just imagine what America would have been like if Sojourner Truth hadn't journeyed across America and told the truth!

Suppose Fannie Lou Hamer had gotten sick and tired of being sick and tired and just left the movement to someone else?

Who among you will step forward and continue the struggle against injustice?

And if no one here is willing to do it, what kind of America will you inherit?

The new America that is being made right now.

You, the young graduates of Berkeley, must see the struggle of your parents, the commitment of our fallen leaders, the principles of dissent that characterize your wonderful institution; don't allow individual suffering to be a stumbling block for doing what is right.

On December 3, 1963 Mario Savo, while speaking at the Free Speech Movement Sit-In here at UC Berkeley, said:

"There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!"

Congratulations young graduates. Go out and make your impact on the world!