

Twenty-Seven Years of Success and Failure at Morehouse

Benjamin E. Mays
Centennial Commencement Address
with an introduction by Alvin Darden

I will always remember the first time I met Dr. Benjamin Mays. It was an experience that I will always remember. I had the pleasure of meeting him during a wedding reception several years after his retirement as President of Morehouse College. Unfortunately, I matriculated at Morehouse College the year after Dr. Mays retired and did not have the opportunity of experiencing his mentoring firsthand. However, throughout my years at Morehouse, I developed a deep appreciation for Dr. Mays through his writings and speeches. His works and ideology have had a profound impact upon my life.

As many of you know, Dr. Mays was both a minister and a theologian, and the theme of personal values permeates the majority of his writings and speeches. During the later part of his career at Morehouse, Dr. Mays spoke on what constitutes a sound and moral character. The ideals which he stressed continue to influence my personal decision making. Specifically, to hold fast to one's heritage, integrity, identity, and pride as an African American male in our society is an everyday challenge that must be met. Dr. Mays expected Morehouse men to meet these challenges; he settled for nothing less. I am proud to say, even in the light of our failures, African American men have been and are continuing to confront and meet these challenges.

I have discovered in my journey through life that adversity forces us to be stronger. Strength of character defeats adversity. We become who we

aspire to be. I believe if Dr. Mays were alive today he would still be stressing the merits of good character upon students and alumni alike. Mays stated in the speech which follows that "...the future of Morehouse rests with its alumni." The alumni of Morehouse have performed well in their chosen vocations and in Mays' words, "If happiness can be achieved, it will be found in a job well done and in giving not receiving."

As you read the final essay in this special volume of *Challenge*, please keep in mind the many changes which have taken place at Morehouse since 1967. Mays' vision of the College continues to be realized. In 1967 Morehouse had 65 full-time teachers with 52 percent holding Ph.D. degrees. Today Morehouse has a faculty in excess of 150 with 75 percent holding the Ph.D. The endowment of Morehouse is in excess of \$65 million, which ensures that the College is on firm financial ground. Morehouse has produced Woodrow Wilson Fellow, Bonner, Luce and Rhodes scholars. The College continues to produce more than its share of doctors, lawyers and businessmen. But more important than these statistics is the fact that the College continues to produce leaders and citizens of sound moral character. The College has done well, but we must be forever vigilant.

I am confident that Dr. Mays would be proud of the successes that have been made by the sons of Morehouse. However, I believe he would equally be concerned about the many and varied problems that face our people, our country, and our world today.

Since 1967 is Morehouse's 100th year, you will understand why I introduce this address with a bit of history, lest we forget the thought patterns out of which Morehouse was molded. When Morehouse was founded in 1867, virtually all of science, religion, and statesmanship were speaking with a unanimous voice declaring that the newly emancipated people were a little less than human.

George Washington, Patrick Henry, and many other fathers of the Constitution owned slaves. A majority of the members of the United States Supreme Court at the time of the Dred Scott decision were slaveholders. Many colleges presidents and professors defended the institution. A Yale professor said: "If Jesus Christ were now on earth, he would under certain circumstances become a slaveholder." Governor McGuffie of South Carolina said in 1835, "No human institution is more manifestly consistent

with the will of God than domestic slavery and no one of his ordinances is written in more legible characters than that which consigns the African race to this condition." In 1860, the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans preached a sermon entitled: "Slavery, A Divine Trust—The Duty of the South to Preserve and Perpetuate the Institution As It Now Exists." Eleven years before Morehouse was founded, a Richmond minister said: "The institution of slavery is full of mercy.... In their bondage here on earthy they [the slaves] have been much better provided for, and great multitudes of them have been made the freemen of the Lord Jesus Christ and left this world rejoicing in the hope of God."

Abraham Lincoln had his misgivings about Negroes. Speaking in Peoria, Illinois, in 1854, he said he would send the slaves back to Africa but that they would perish in ten days. Speaking of social and political equality, Lincoln said, "We cannot make them equal."

The Anthropological Society of America, writing with special reference to the Negro in 1868, said: "The greatest achievement of anthropological science, we conceive, will be the speedy convincing of all civilized nations of the utter uselessness of all these old and expensive attempts to civilize uncivilized races of men." Nott and Gliddon, in their book, *Types of Mankind*, two years before Morehouse was founded, wrote in 1865: "In the broad field and long duration of Negro life, not a single civilization, spontaneous or borrowed, has existed to adorn its gloomy past." Louis Agassiz, professor of zoology and geology at Harvard University wrote about a century ago: "A peculiar confrontation characterizes the brain of an adult Negro. Its development never gets beyond that observable in the Caucasian in boyhood." Thomas Jefferson, the great statesman, said: "Never yet could I find that a Black utter a thought above the level of plain narration; never saw even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture." John C. Calhoun declared he would be willing to give the Negro citizenship when he mastered the Greek verb. Samuel George Morton, the most eminent craniologist in the United States in the 19th century, concluded: "The capacity of the Negro cranium was less than that of the Anglo-Saxon by twelve inches, and that, therefore, the Negro was incapable of intellectual equality with the Anglo-Saxon."

Henry Grady, speaking to the Texas State Fair at Dallas, October 25, 1887, said this: "The races and tribes of earth are of divine origin.... What God hath separated let no man join together." Speaking further, this great Georgian said: "Standing in the presence of this multitude, sober with the

responsibility of the message delivered to the young men of the South, I declare this truth above all others, to be worn unsullied and sacred in your hearts, to be surrendered to no force, sold for no price, compromised in no necessity, but cherished and defended as the covenant of your prosperity, and the pledge of peace to your children, that the white race must dominate forever in the South, because it is the white race and superior to that race by which its supremacy is threatened."

Writing in 1910 in his book, *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro*, Howard Odum helped to perpetuate the image of Negro inferiority. That is what he wrote: "The Negro has little conscience or love of home, no local attachment of the better sort... He has no pride of ancestry and he is not influenced by the lives of great men. The Negro has few ideals and perhaps no lasting adherence to an aspiration toward real worth. He has little conception of the meaning of virtue, truth, manhood, integrity. He is shiftless, untidy, and indolent. Fortunately, Dr. Odum lived long enough to change his mind. All this goes to prove how fallible, how finite, and how wrong the most brilliant mind can be when it plays the role of God and speaks ex-cathedra about the future of man.

This was the matrix out of which Morehouse was born. This was the prevailing notion up to and throughout the first quarter of the 20th century. Though Morehouse did wonders to prove the falsehood of these prejudiced minds prior to 1940, I speak to the subject: "Twenty-Seven Years of Success and Failure at Morehouse."

In September, 1940, in my first speech to the Morehouse faculty and student body, I made a vow. I pledged that I would not cheat on the job. I promised them that I would give to Morehouse all that I had—mind, heart, body, and soul. Twenty-seven years later I come to tell you that I have kept that pledge. I have not cheated on the job. No dishonesty is so reprehensible as that dishonesty where one cheats on a job when great responsibility has been placed on his shoulders.

I have no regrets in retiring from the presidency of Morehouse at this juncture in history. I regret, however, that what has been accomplished in these 27 years trails so far behind my dreams for the College and so far behind what I had aspired for Morehouse to be that I feel a sense of failure. I wish I could tell you today that the future of Morehouse was guaranteed in the stars.

From this point on, I use the pronoun "we." Friends, alumni, trustees, faculty, and students all share in the success of the College. Likewise, we

all share in the College's failure. If an alumnus could have given to the support of the College and did not, he contributed to our failure. If a teacher did not do his job well, he, too, contributed to the College's shortcomings. If students lived down below their capacity, they must share the blame for any weakness manifested during these 27 years. If a trustee might have helped and did not, he must accept blame for not doing his share. If I were derelict in my duty, I, too, must be cited as one responsible for not doing what I ought to have done.

Unfortunately, in 1940, circumstances had converged so that Morehouse was, without a doubt, the weakest link among the affiliated institutions in the Atlanta University System. This weakness manifested itself in a highly inadequate physical plant, a faculty that was being slowly depleted in size, a very meager endowment, and low morale among faculty, students, and alumni. Many factors contributed to this low morale at the College. Morehouse had less of everything except manpower, and soon the ravages of the Second World War began to reduce its manpower to a negligible size. A distinguished trustee was so pessimistic about the small Morehouse enrollment during the Second World War that he suggested that Morehouse should consider closing for the duration.

We believed when we came, and we believe as we leave that the strength of one institution in this affiliation is the strength of all and that the weakness of one is the weakness of all. While we seek to cooperate fully, each institution must strive to be strong enough to add strength to the entire Center. So, our first task in 1940 was to make Morehouse an equal partner in the Atlanta University System so it could give as much as it would receive. Whatever was needed to be done to restore the integrity of the College had to be done, and it was done. Soon the Morehouse morale began to rise and the Morehouse spirit began to hum.

We set out to improve the academic quality of the student body. This accounts for the fact that we have only gradually increased the enrollment since 1941, rather than increase it too rapidly. We have increased the enrollment from 358 to 962, an increase of 169 percent. The increase since World War II is close to 300 percent. The number of our graduates who go on to graduate and professional schools has risen spectacularly. In the 1964-65 school year, 56 percent of our graduates continued their studies in graduate and professional schools; in the 1965-66 year, 51.5 percent. It is significant to note that of the 188 Morehouse graduates who have earned the Ph.D. degree, 62, or 44 percent, of them graduated from Morehouse since

1943, representing 34 universities. Although the majority of our graduates entering medical schools go to Meharry and Howard, increasing numbers are being admitted to medical schools like the University of Chicago, Western Reserve, Rochester, Harvard, Emory, Boston, and the University of Texas. Morehouse must forever strive to provide its students with a quality education.

Perhaps the greatest success the College has achieved in 17 years is the high academic quality of teachers who comprise the faculty. This was our choice despite pressures from many sources to direct our meager funds to other useful and interesting but non-academic pursuits. Not to provide the students with the ablest faculty available is criminal and irresponsible. In 1940, we had the equivalent of two full-time teachers who had earned the Ph.D. degree, or 8.7 percent of the staff. In 1966-67, we have 65 full-time teachers and 34, or 52.3 percent of them, hold doctorates. The number of doctorates on the faculty is 17 times greater than it was in the academic year 1940-41. Excepting one or two, the rest hold master's degrees, and many have studied from one to four years beyond. Three hold the B.D. degree.

In academic training, this places Morehouse above all predominantly undergraduate Negro colleges. Comparing the 1964 Morehouse faculty with data on certain faculties taken from American Universities and Colleges, American Council on Education, 1964, the Morehouse percentage of doctorates exceeded the percentages of doctorates at Albion, Allegheny, Bates, Colby, Cornell in Iowa, Kalamazoo, and Lawrence colleges; and equaled the percentage at Bowdoin and Earlham. Replies from 17 predominantly white colleges in the Southeast on this point, colleges of comparable size to Morehouse, show that in faculty training Morehouse was stronger than nine and weaker than eight. In faculty training, Morehouse stands ahead of hundreds of American colleges. It has taken 27 years of constant planning to build and maintain a faculty of this strength.

Do not misunderstand me, I am not naive enough to believe that a teacher is a better teacher because he holds an A.M., a B.D., or a Ph.D. degree. I am not arguing that a teacher is more honest or loves his students more dearly because he has an advanced degree. I am arguing, however, that less training does not make one a better teacher nor a more honest man. There is no virtue in an academically weak faculty. Since this is true, we have striven in these 27 years to bring to Morehouse the ablest faculty we could command.

Healthy morale, an alert student body, an able faculty must be accompanied by a good physical plant. Although the physical plant needs to be enlarged in housing, worship, and academic facilities, since 1940 the physical plant has been improved by increasing the number of buildings from eight to 25 and the floor space from 101,612 to 304,836 square feet. The floor space is more than three times what it was 27 years ago, and yet five new buildings are needed now. Our laboratory equipment in physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, psychology, and health and physical education, is first-rate and adds to the healthy morale of our faculty and student body. Again, this was our choice despite pressures from many sources to direct our meager funds to other useful and interesting but non-academic pursuits. The land area has been increased from 10.6910 to 20.1771 acres; the additional 9.4861 acres cost the College \$379,444, \$40,000 per acre.

We have just spoken of the strong academic faculty that Morehouse has been able to build and maintain. This has been true in part because we have been able to get terminal grants from foundations—grants that must be used up within a specified period of years—and because we have been able to increase the endowment, although the ration of increase has been entirely too slow. The book value of the endowment is \$4,500,000, and the market value is approximately \$6,000,000. The book value is an increase from \$1,114,000 to \$4,500,000, which is four times greater than it was in 1940. We had hoped to increase it eight times greater, but we were unable to do so despite excessive efforts on our part. Although some \$15,000,000, for all purposes, has been raised in these years, a president of a great university can get \$15,000,000 by making two or three visits to a great foundation.

We have made progress in the current budget. Whereas the current budget was only \$134,318 in 1940-41, during the present academic year, 1966-67, counting money from all sources, specific projects, and the operating budget, \$1,803,782 came to the College from March, 1966, through March, 1967—an increase of 1200 percent in 27 years. Though salaries are lower than they should be, we are happy to report that the lowest salary is six and two-thirds times greater than it was in 1940-41 and the highest salary is six times more than it was in 1940-41. I know, however, that the cost of living has also increased.

Realizing that it would hardly be possible for Morehouse College to build a first-rate School of Religion in addition to a first-rate College, we played a large role in bringing into being the Interdenominational Theo-

logical Center. We initiated conversations with Morris Brown College and Gammon Theological Seminary in 1940; and the Morehouse School of Religion, the Phillips School of Theology of Lane College [Jackson, Tenn.], Turner Theological Seminary of Morris Brown College, and with the leadership of Gammon Theological Seminary, the Interdenominational Theological Center was created in 1959. The four institutions working together succeeded in getting in 1958 an appropriation of \$1,750,000 from the Seatlantic Fund and \$250,000 from the General Education Board, which guaranteed the reality of the ITC.

What a paradox! Occupying since 1889 a campus that was a great battleground during the Civil War, in the siege of Atlanta, for 100 years Morehouse has tried to develop a free man in a racially circumscribed society. The Morehouse philosophy was and is that a man does not have to accept the view that because he is a Negro certain things were not meant for him. He can be free in a highly segregated society. Long before demonstrations and Supreme Court decisions abolished segregation, the Morehouse students were taught to accept no segregated situation except that which was absolutely necessary; and though their bodies were segregated, their minds could be free. Students who broke faith with this principle and went to segregated theatres, restaurants, and churches went there without administrative sanction.

If the Morehouse graduates, on the whole, have done better than the graduates of most predominantly Negro colleges, it is due in part to the philosophy drilled into them that the Morehouse man can succeed in the world despite crippling circumstances under which he had to live. Morehouse was built on the faith of Negroes and a few white leaders like Joseph T. Robert, Morehouse's first president, a South Carolinian who went North rather than rear his children in a land of slaves.

The College has done well in recent decades, but not well enough. We were naive when we came in 1940. We believed that if you could produce a good faculty, show that the alumni were making their mark in the world, and that the College's able students did well in graduate and professional schools, it would make fund raising relatively easy. It isn't necessarily so. We believed that in ten years we could create a scholarly atmosphere at the College so that the desire to pursue excellence would be so contagious that the majority of the students would pursue excellence and that the purposeless could not survive. We did not fully succeed. We believed in 1940 that, if we moved the College forward and made it better year by

year, with some cultivation, we could raise the percentage of alumni givers to 50 percent. It wasn't true. That dream has not been fulfilled. If we can maintain the impetus of the Centennial, the dream will come true. We believed that Morehouse, a Georgia institution for 100 years and an Atlanta institution for 88 years, would be able to get someone to head a campaign for at least a million dollars in recognition of 100 years of valuable service to the city, state, and nation. We were sadly mistaken. The Negro colleges of Atlanta are not considered part and parcel of the life of the community. My guess is that in a hundred years the six institutions of the Atlanta University Center have not received a million and a half dollars from the Atlanta community nor from the entire South. The Atlanta community has accepted no responsibility for the financial health and development of these colleges despite the fact that we spend millions here each year and provide leadership for the South and for the nation. We believed when we came that each and every person saddled with a responsibility here at Morehouse would do his work so well that constant follow-up would be unnecessary. It isn't so.

The Morehouse administration, and especially the Morehouse faculty, are able, very able. But it is my considered judgment that we are too educationally conservative, inclined to be afraid to experiment, to blaze new paths, I sometimes think we are allergic to change. We tend to be tied to tradition and the past. Our danger lies in complacency, a disease that plagues all too many colleges. The Atlanta community is one of the best social laboratories in the nation. Significant community research should be going on all the time. I know we are busy, but, as a rule, people do what they want to do. In community research and in projects designed to assist the unfortunate in the Atlanta community, we would do more.

Communication is a difficult art. I think we failed to communicate to faculty, students, trustees, and alumni, what our dreams and aspirations are for Morehouse. And, as lovely and loyal, and devoted as you have been and are, the presidency of a college is a lonely job because communication is so difficult; and yet there have been many happy moments and joyous returns. In all these areas, we have felt frustration and a sense of failure.

Now, what about the years ahead for Morehouse? One fact is clear: Morehouse cannot live on its past reputation. Without a doubt, the years ahead will be tough years, but perhaps no tougher than the first hundred years. All of our years have been precarious years, but like England we have muddled through. The first hundred years were years of rigid segrega-

tion supported by law and religion. During the first one hundred years, Morehouse competed mainly with Negro colleges, similarly segregated. No one questions their survival for, after all, Negroes had to have schools. The power structure in politics, economics, and education, whether the school was private or public, never intended to make schools for Negroes first-rate. The racial attitude in America, whether in slavery or in segregation, has consistently been that what was meant for Negroes has to be inferior to that which is designed for whites. It was expected and deliberately planned that segregated schools for Negroes would be inferior. For almost a hundred years no one even questioned this philosophy. A great leader in the Commission on Interracial Cooperation once said in my hearing that in order to advance the Negro child one step, the white child must be advanced two steps.

Desegregation, won through court decision, congressional legislation, and demonstrations, has not changed this basic philosophy of inequality. So, to use a good Methodist phrase, Negro colleges have been by design kept on sort grass! For the health of Morehouse and other colleges similarly circumstanced, the philosophy must be accepted by philanthropic America and governments that a good college, whether it is predominantly Negro or predominantly white, deserved equal consideration in bidding for the tax and philanthropic dollar. If this philosophy cannot be developed, there will exist under the guise of desegregation and liberalism, a form of discrimination as rancid and foul as anything that existed under legal and de facto segregation.

Discrimination in the future will not be administered by poor whites and the people who believe in segregation but by the "liberals" who believe in a desegregated society but not an integrated society. If this battle can be won, Morehouse will have an equal chance to develop like any other good college in America. If discrimination against Negroes is directed now against the predominantly Negro institutions rather than against the individual, the future will be difficult indeed. The Negro's battle for justice and equality in the future will not be against the Wallaces, the Barnetts, and the Maddoxes, but against the subtlety of our "liberal friends" who wine and dine with us in the swankiest hotels, work with us, and still discriminate against us when it comes to money and power. This battle must be won because for a long time the wealth of this nation will be in the hands of white Americans and not Negroes. The abolition of economic, political, and philanthropic discrimination is the first order of the

day, not for the good of Negroes alone but for the nation as a whole. The future of Morehouse will depend upon our ability to "buy" the intellectually talented students just as many of the predominantly white institutions are able to do with finances given for that purpose. To finance white schools for this purpose and not Negro schools is gross discrimination, not by the admittedly prejudiced but by our "liberal friends." Morehouse's record in the educational world has been made in the best graduate and professional schools. If this record is diminished we will be reduced to a role of mediocrity.

Finally, the future of Morehouse rests with its alumni. Yale, Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, and Chicago will survive because their graduates will see to it that they do. Morehouse men have not accumulated millions, but if they really cared, they could contribute to the College \$100,000 a year and, in time, \$500,000. If the Morehouse alumni will do this, they will cause corporations and foundations and friends to contribute millions of dollars to the College. This is my final plea to the Morehouse alumni. If you really care, the future of Morehouse is secure. If you do not care, its future is precarious.

I cannot close this address without publicly paying tribute to Charles Merrill, Chairman of the Morehouse Board of Trustees. If the Morehouse salaries are fairly competitive, give large credit to Charles Merrill. If we have sent able students to the best professional and graduate schools, give credit to Charles Merrill through the Early Admission Program. If our faculty is widely traveled, salute Charles Merrill. If sixty-odd Morehouse students have studied and traveled in Europe, let us give thanks to Charles Merrill. If Morehouse is on the verge of being accepted as worthy of membership in Phi Beta Kappa, let us take off our hats to Charles Merrill. It has to be an act of God that Charles Merrill came into our life.

Now, my dear Seniors, let me say to you what I said to the graduating class of 1964. Will you please rise?

The curtain has fallen forever on the activities of your years at Morehouse. What you have done, poorly or well, can never be erased. What you should have done and neglected to do cannot now be done. Not even an omnipotent God can blot out the deeds of history. It has been beautifully said:

The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on; nor all your piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,

Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

Since the events of history are irrevocable, I can only advise you to utilize the past, whatever it is, to good advantage and to look to the future with courage and confidence. Twenty-five years from today, it is more than likely that my days will long since have passed, and you will be about 47 years old. I hope you will return in 1992 to celebrate your twenty-fifth anniversary. I trust you will return economically secure in houses and land, stocks and bonds, car and bank account; intellectually secure in the constant pursuit of knowledge, and affectionately secure with fine wives and handsome children.

Wherever I may be 25 years from today—on earth, beneath the earth, or above it—you will make my spirit glad if you are known in life by the quality of your work and the integrity of your character rather than by the quantity of your possessions.

If your work is Government, I hope you will do your work so well that you will be diligently sought after and widely acclaimed by Government. If your work be that of a chemist, a physicist, a mathematician in industry, I hope you will perform so excellently that when promotions are in order your record will be so impressive that those in power will be compelled to examine your credentials. If you make business a career, I hope the people will say in discussing you that you are both competent and honest. If its politics, may they never say that you achieved office through dishonest means.

If you chose the ministry, I pray that you will be so eloquent in speech, so profound in thought, so honest in performance, and so understanding in the knowledge of the strength and frailties of man that the people will say of you, "He must be a man of God."

If you choose medicine, dentistry, or surgery, I hope you will be so dedicated to the healing art, so skilled in the performance of your duty, and so loyal and devoted to the people you serve that in that reunion at Morehouse in 1992, your classmates will flock around you to talk about your skill in surgery and your knowledge of medicine rather than the size of your bank account or the model of your car.

If you chose teaching, may you be so knowledgeable in what you teach, so devoted to your students, so inspiring in your teaching and so stimulating in your writing that the students will say of you, "He was born to teach."

If you do the ordinary work of the world, do it with distinction and make no apology for it, for all work is honorable if it is beneficial to man-

kind.

My dear young friends, I do not know what happiness is and I do not think it is important that you be happy. But it is important that you find your work and do it as if you were sent into the world at this precise moment in history to do your job. If happiness can be achieved, it will be found in a job well done and in giving and not in receiving.

May the years ahead be motivating, challenging, and inspiring years, and may they be gracious and kind to you and bring success in all the good things you do.

Leben Sie Wohl!