

## **REMARKS FOR ADMINISTRATOR BOLDEN**

### **HEYWARD E. MCDONALD LECTURE**

**Columbia, S.C.**

**Jan. 18, 2011**

Thank you, Minister Cook. It's my pleasure to join you tonight, in my hometown, surrounded by so much that brings back memories of my growing up and the years when Martin Luther King, Jr. was inspiring millions of people – not only with his living, vibrant oratory, but also with his deeply held beliefs. Beliefs that are timeless and universal. And one reason his memory is still so revered today. His contributions to a more peaceful and just world will never be forgotten.

I've been privileged to speak at a number of universities, both at commencements and also in the course of the academic year. It's always one of my favorite things to do, because young people are so enthusiastic about the future, and they always teach me a lot about what goes on in the real world. They are the hope for tomorrow, no doubt.

As most here are quite aware, my parents – Charles Sr. and Ethel – were career educators, so I was truly blessed. A passion for learning and high expectations for pursuing my education were integral to my growing up. I had examples of right living directly in front of me daily, with which not everyone is blessed, I know. In my mom and dad, my brother, Warren, and I had Dr. King's principles right before me at the dinner table.

Many of the values I have brought to my professional life, I got from my parents...being bold, being fearless, and not allowing what other people think or say deter me from doing what is right. They taught me not to just sit on the sideline of life, but to strive to turn my passion and dreams into reality. My parents were adherents of the tenets of Dr. King.

I wasn't called upon to be as brave as the Little Rock Nine or the other students who walked up the steps past screaming crowds just to go to school, but in my personal life, I took strength from Reverend King's work. I also learned the value of public service through my parents. That commitment to public service led me to join the military – I attended the U.S. Naval Academy and enjoyed a 34-year career in the U.S. Marine Corps.

When Dr. King was preaching his non-violent protest, I was diligently working to get into the Naval Academy. That's not really such a paradox. I wanted to serve my country as my father and my uncles had done in World War II when Blacks had to fight for the right to serve in our Armed Forces -- to follow in the footsteps of so many brave Americans who had gone before me -- one of them being Heyward E. McDonald. So many of them African American men and women who endured hardships because of their race, but were still proud to serve. And I have also been fortunate to take part in government and civic life. I suppose if you want, I could tell you what it's like to testify before Congress, but I'd like to keep this upbeat!

I'm often asked what it takes to be an astronaut. What one should study. I try to steer students to the broader fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The opportunities will grow from there. Nearly every astronaut has a background in one of these fields. And if space flight is not in your future, there are many, many exciting career paths you can take with a background in what we call the STEM fields.

At NASA, our primary criteria are excellence and diversity. But you do have to be passionate. And no matter what field is yours, if you become a member of the NASA family, yes, eventually, inevitably, you'll learn a little something about rocket science.

I firmly believe that the STEM fields, that exploration and all of the work we do at NASA, contributes to the greater welfare of the world and, yes, the amount of peace and justice in it. Let me explain. When we send humans into space, we learn things about what it takes to live and work off planet that we can apply to life here on Earth. Things like materials that protect firemen; protective padding that is used in bike helmets; water processing technology that can help people in areas with little access to clean water. There's a huge list of the technologies that have been transferred from our exploration missions to life here on Earth. They've improved the standard of living for people across the globe, and we're far from through yet.

If people are healthier and happier and have access to clean water and have information that helps them respond to natural disaster, as many of our Earth observing satellites have provided, then standards of living improve and there is less poverty, less violence. So I believe in NASA's

mission in pragmatic terms. But also, like Dr. King, I believe in the essential inspiration that is necessary to move people to do better, to reach for their higher potential. I believe our exploration mission also helps us to be better human beings – to strive for something just out of reach.

So while I don't always go into all that when I talk to students about why they should pursue STEM careers, I nevertheless think it's a key component. After all, if you don't have passion, if you can't connect your work to some greater good, you'll find it difficult to sustain anything you pursue. The slings and arrows, the questions about why you are where you are, especially if you are a woman or minority, will be nearly impossible to face if you don't have the core convictions of your passion.

This is one reason why Dr. King's legacy is so strong. It wasn't an action plan, although he taught us plenty of ways to make a statement and bring about change. It was a passion plan – a way of spreading the flame from heart to heart. To the 250,000 of all races who gathered on the National Mall in Washington to hear the "I Have a Dream Speech," to the many more around the country who sat down and refused to be moved from bus seats or lunch counters.

There were few African American Midshipmen when I attended the Naval Academy and my becoming a Midshipman almost didn't happen. No one in my South Carolina Congressional Delegation would provide a nomination or an appointment required for admission to the Academy. I wrote President Johnson asking for help, and that's when Congressman William Dawson of Illinois provided me with the appointment I needed to be admitted. Rep. Dawson was himself a veteran of World War I, and only the third African American elected to Congress in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was the only serving Black member during his first term.

Things have changed. I have the honor today of being the first African American Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Serving under the nation's first Black President. Believe me, when I grew up, either one of those things would have been unimaginable as I sat in Columbia's old Carver Theater, the only movie house in town at that time for Black people.

But when I speak to young people today, the ones who I hope will take the gains that previous generations have made, and make their own progress,

when I speak to them, I tell them, don't waste your time trying to explain yourself, your identity, or justify your existence to anyone in the workplace or anywhere else. Do your job and do it very well. Live your life according to the Golden Rule and the strong principles taught by King. Always remind yourself of 'why' you are pursuing the things you do and stay in touch with that answer, and don't let others define it for you. This is especially true in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics disciplines that we so urgently need young people to pursue. The fields are tough, no doubt about it. But at NASA we're doing all we can to inspire young people to become the exploration leaders of tomorrow, for their benefit and ours!

It's a new world all around. What I preside over at NASA would have been science fiction when I was growing up. The International Space Station, an orbiting outpost the size of a football field, circling overhead 250 miles above Earth, with human occupants 24/7 for more than ten years now would have been unthinkable in my college days. In fact, the international partnership that built and operates the ISS would itself have been unthinkable even very recently. That we have a regular presence at Saturn

and Mars and will soon have a satellite orbiting Mercury was something we could only conceptualize when I studied at the U.S. Naval Academy.

And of course, this year we are also wrapping up 30 years of flying the space shuttle. In addition to the numerous scientific and technological breakthroughs it has made possible, it has also been instrumental in providing space flight opportunities for women and people of color, effectively breaking down that segregation without a single law being passed to force it. Nearly 400 people have flown on the vehicle with distinction and honor. Crews have made the ultimate sacrifice. And flight managers and ground teams have shown an extraordinary dedication to this program that has inspired the world. It was my great privilege to fly four times on the shuttle.

Today's generation will have the chance – if not the right – to take the hard-won advantages they have inherited from the generations of their parents and grandparents and build upon them. Embodied in them are the hopes and dreams and aspirations of a truly united America. It is only as one nation that we will be able to face and conquer the challenges not only that science and technology have in store for us, but also that our own human



failings provide, sometimes on a daily basis - a chance to change and improve. And it is our diversity from which true innovation, creativity and progress will ensue.

I certainly owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. King. And as I continue to speak to Historically Black Colleges and Universities and many other groups around the world, I'll strive to show by example how grateful, how proud I am to have the opportunities he helped to make possible.

Dr. King helped us answer that question 'why.' His actions arose from a belief, a moral compass – a conviction that there were higher principles that we could and should follow. I've had the privilege of viewing our planet from above, where its serenity and lack of political borders belies the truth of what sometimes happens on the ground. I hope more people will have that chance in the future. It could only increase understanding and bring about a realization of how much we are all in this together.

Until that day happens, those of us earthbound have Dr. King to look to as a guidepost on our way. Long before I took flight in aircraft and spacecraft, his principles were freely given to me. I carried them with me to war, to

space, and now in my daily life in the decisions I make as a leader, as a lifelong learner, a father and husband, and a citizen.

I'll leave you with the words of the Rev. Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, Dr. King's mentor during his years of study at Morehouse College. It is Dr. Mays who perhaps influenced Dr. King most, and whose words and thoughts we frequently heard reflected in the words of Dr. King. This is from a sermon by Dr. Mays titled "What Man Lives By."

*"It must be borne in mind, however, that the tragedy in life does not lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disaster to be unable to capture your ideal, but it is a disaster to have no ideal to capture. It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim is the sin."*