

Speech delivered by H.E. Jeremiah C. Sulunteh
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of
Liberia to the United States on the occasion of the 149th
Commencement Convocation of the University of Louisiana at
Lafayette, Louisiana, USA

May 15, 2015

Preparing Global Citizens and Celebrating Diversity

Salutation:

- * The Chair and members of the Board of Trustee
- * Dr. Joseph Savoie, President, Faculty and Staff,
- * His Lordship Mayor Joey Durel and other officials of State and local Government,
- * Distinguished invited guests and dignitaries,
- * Family and friends, members of the graduating class,
- * Ladies and gentlemen

I bring you sincere greetings and best wishes on behalf of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the Government and people of Liberia and the Liberian Embassy in Washington on this great occasion.

I am honored by your request to serve as guest speaker for what I consider, one of the most important and significant days of your lives. Although today marks a crucial phase in a continuous journey for some of you, for others, it is an opportunity for value addition to the service you currently provide in your areas of profession. Congratulations!!

Distinguished graduates, we have come to join in the celebration of your achievements from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and to once again enjoy the warm hospitality of the State of Louisiana. I should like to inform you that Liberia, has a historical relationship with the State of Louisiana. The State of Louisiana is a place of historic importance to the continent of Africa. Our forefathers tell us that between 1718 to 1750, slave traders transported thousands of captive Africans to Louisiana from the coast of Senegal in West Africa. By 1840, New Orleans had the biggest slave market in the United States, which contributed greatly to the economy. Today, New Orleans has become one of the wealthiest cities in the United States.

It is particularly pleasing to note that I represent this tiny country on the West Coast of Africa, just about the size of Ohio, but a bit larger than Tennessee, with a population of 4.1 million people. Liberia is a country that embodies the yearning of freed slaves to establish on the homeland, the continent of Africa, a nation-state in their quest for self-governance. That dream, with the assistance of the American Colonization Society, was fulfilled by the successful declaration of Independence of the Republic of Liberia on July 26, 1847.

History also tells us that the first ten presidents of Liberia were African Americans. Since then, majority of succeeding Liberian presidents have been African Americans or descendants of African Americans. Many of these returnees were educated in American schools. These returnees carried with them American traditions and cultures that impact our life styles today in Liberia. Many streets and cities in Liberia are named for cities in the United States, including the city of "Louisiana" a settlement named for your beautiful state, Louisiana.

I am also pleased to note that a distinguished citizen of Louisiana, the Honorable Linda Thomas Greenfield, now Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, served as Ambassador to Liberia a few years ago, whom the Liberian people miss so very much. **So, as a Liberian, I feel a connection and I feel right at home. Thank you for the invitation!**

While it is true that all who are eligible don't choose **the option of a college education**, it's undeniable that those who do, like yourselves are involved in a tremendous and exhilarating experience, which starts today.

Indeed, today should energize you like very few others in your lives. I will attempt to spare you all the regular clichés, but I will seek to encourage you through the Topic; "**Preparing Global Citizens and Celebrating Diversity**".

By now, you all must realize how small and personal the world has become. The Internet as you know, in addition to other advanced systems of communication and technology, removes borders and enables a virtual global existence.

Your generation, coined the Millennials, like many generations before you, has had some extreme defining moments like the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the shootings at Columbine and Virginia Tech, the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina, or a tornado in Texas, among others. You are more diverse; you read reviews and research on the internet; you remain closely connected with your friends through social media and find direct contact and communication not as necessary. You have an absorption with technology. Your fellow millennial, Mark Zuckerberg, born in 1984 is now one of the world's youngest billionaires according to Forbes.

Time magazine reports that Americans ages 18 to 29 send and receive approximately 88 text messages per day compared to 17 phone calls.

While there are many good reasons why this level of technology absorption is necessary in our daily lives, let me admonish you not to completely abandon communication with a human touch and voice because a lot of what is conveyed in meaning and emotion can be lost in instant messages and texts.

Your challenge as you leave these walls is to determine what your impact as an individual and as a collective group of university graduates will have on **your world**.

Indeed, **the World is yours and you must own it** with all of its challenging difficulties; including the pressing and insurmountable needs of humanity; and the uncompromising and demanding voice of social justice that refuses to be quieted by traditional means.

Just as there are competing groups of priorities in global economic development all across the world; there are domestic and social issues that are no longer localized, but have, out of necessity, assumed international dimensions.

"Preparing Global Citizens and Celebrating Diversity" Distinguished graduates, your years of study at the University of Louisiana has prepared you to become global citizens that are well equipped to serve in a global village with diverse challenges. Your commencement convocation today is an endorsement that you are smart, you are spirited and that you are prepared to always seek solutions to the challenges of our one world.

The United States is not the world, and as you graduate here in the United States, allow the world to experience the greatness of an

American education. Unfortunately, your participation is no longer optional, it has become imperative.

You will inevitably be confronted with various and diverse issues that will provide opportunities for expression of what lies inside of each of you. Indeed, I challenge you to see these difficulties as opportunities to make impact and change your world. Therefore, what impact each of us make every day makes a lot of difference in our communities, our society and our one world.

Distinguished graduates, our topic under discussion, "Preparing Global Citizens and Celebrating Diversity" was perhaps manifested when African slaves brought on these shores learnt skills and knowledge while serving slave masters that were seen as leadership transferred to their homeland; our topic is also being manifested when the international community prepares and mobilize the military to promote peace and security around the world, prepare medical and social workers to facilitate migration, integration and health services where they are need.

And oday, the Board of Trustee has endorsed the recommendations of the President and Faculty of the University of Louisiana to certificate you as ambassadors of the University to go out there and impact your world. As you leave these walls of the University of Louisiana today, you have been given the requisite tools, the knowledge and skills that are not only necessary, but sufficient to positively impact the world. Whichever continent you will go, make the best representation of your Alma Mater and America's dream to make the world a better place for all mankind.

Distinguished invited guests, fellow academics, ladies and gentlemen, permit me to use this occasion to extend on behalf of the Government and people of Liberia immense thanks and appreciation to the people

of the United States and the international community for the tremendous support to the fight of the deadly Ebola Virus Disease that attacked the West Africa Region, specifically, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. The outbreak of this deadly disease in March 2014, and the robust response of the world is an example of this extraordinarily new global realization of which I speak.

As a direct result of this, over 4,700 of our compatriots, including 92 health-care workers lost their lives, while helping to save lives. In Sierra Leone, over 3,900 have lost their lives and in Guinea, over 2,300 are reported to have died so far. When an infected individual traveled to Texas and infected others, the problem, seeing initially as an African problem instantly became a global, health and security threat. Just as instantly, resources in the form of funding, equipment and personnel were connected to the fight and within a reasonable time, Ebola succumbed and as I speak to you now, Liberia is Ebola free.

As I position to close my remarks, let me remind all of us here today that Liberia, this tiny West African country needs you **now more** than ever before in its post-Ebola Recovery effort. Liberia's post-Ebola challenges are the government's top priorities.

About 62% of the population comprise of youth, between the ages of 15-35. Majority of this group lacks basic skills and education. Liberia's health care system needs a transformation for any future challenges, and its infrastructural development is in dire need. Consequently, Education, health and infrastructure are three top priorities for the government in its agenda for transformation.

As we join you today in celebrating the achievements of these students, our hearts are **aching** that many Liberian youths would wish that someday somehow, they too could **have** such opportunity to

acquire knowledge and skills that will prepare them for service to their villages, communities and the larger Liberian society.

Mr. President, in this regard, we would wish to seek a partnership with the University of Louisiana that would afford some of our young Liberians the opportunity to drink of the great fountain of knowledge at your university. And Mr. President, we will welcome the opportunity to further discuss such a partnership.

Ladies and gentlemen of the graduating class, the whole world beckons you and expects to feel the weight of your presence in their local and national affairs, not only when there exist a threat to our global existence, but as always.

Distinguished invited guests, parents, faculty and staff, Mr. President and Members of the Board of Trustee, thank you so much for the opportunity given me to share these little thoughts at this great commencement convocation! Congratulations!!!

I thank you.