

Commencement Address by Her Excellency Ellen Johnson  
Sirleaf

President of the Republic of Liberia

On “The Preservation of Legacies”

University of Georgetown, Washington, D.C.

May 22, 2010

**President John J. DeGioia;**

**Dean Carol Lancaster**

**Members of the Board of Trustees;**

**Faculty, Staff and Students;**

**Members of the Graduating Class of 2010;**

**Parents, Family and Friends;**

**Distinguished Guests;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen;**

**Friends:**

Let me begin by expressing my thanks and appreciation to President DeGioia and the Trustees of this esteemed University for the double honor bestowed upon me today: as recipient of a Doctor of Humane Letter Honoris Causa, and as the Commencement Speaker to Georgetown’s School of Foreign Service Class of 2010.

On this visit, I am the recipient of three honorary degrees. Each one holds a special significance for me. I accept them on behalf of the Liberian people as a recognition of the resilience shown by them as they make the transition from war to peace, from dependency to development and from failure to opportunity.

This is “Graduation Season” in the United States and in most of the world, and when that time rolls around and someone invites me to speak, I happily accept, because of the importance I attach to education.

My thanks, and gratitude, therefore, to President DeGioia for the very kind invitation.

This is my second time at Georgetown University; the first to speak to your community soon after my election to office upon the invitation of Dean Carol Lancaster whom I admire and respect. Carol, please accept my most sincere congratulations on your recent appointment as the Dean of the Foreign Service. I cannot imagine a better choice to lead this fine institution forward. My first speech was given in Gaston Hall, surrounded by reflections of many of the leading philosophers of the world, it seems fitting that today I speak to you surrounded by many of the most promising minds of the future.

I consider this opportunity a distinct honor to address this Graduating Class, because of the academic pedigree of Georgetown. The tradition and pursuit of academic excellence, coupled with the Jesuit ethic of teaching students to be men and women for others, has been the hallmark of this institution as evidenced in the quality of its graduates.

One of the first two Interns to serve my Government are members of this Graduating Class. Ryan Callahan, your Valedictorian, and Oliver Cashin came to Liberia in the summer of their freshman year and worked for the John F. Kennedy Medical Center and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, respectively. It pleases me greatly that these two fine young men are returning to Liberia this summer. My country thanks you, and I thank you for this contribution to our national capacity development.

As further proof of my Government's relationship with Georgetown, a current member of my staff, a young Liberian who was trained at Georgetown, is a 2009 graduate of the Masters of Foreign Service program. There are many proud Hoyas in our Government, all doing their part to "Lift Liberia."

Congratulations, Class of 2010. You've reached a major milestone, and I join your family, friends, and faculty in applauding your achievements. Let me also acknowledge the parents and guardians who provided you the financial, emotional and moral support through the years. This, too, is your occasion to share.

Today, we participate in a ceremony that is a tradition. In one form or another, every society has a way of preparing its youth for the greater world. The intention is to preserve the traditions and values we hold dear; prevent a repetition of our worst mistakes; and maybe, just maybe, to improve upon the legacy that has been handed down from previous generations. Our presence here today joins us to the past and links us to the future.

**Ladies and Gentlemen:**

This theme of preserving our best traditions and values is one to which I shall return. It is evident in the history of Georgetown, and I see parallels in my own story and the history of my country. We stand on the shoulders of our forebears, and we have a duty to conduct our lives in such a way that another generation can, in its turn, stand on our shoulders. I want to share with you what I have picked up, along the way, regarding the preservation of legacies.

Many of you already know this, but it bears repeating, that Georgetown is the oldest Roman Catholic University in the United States. Over the years, it has garnered accolades for the quality education it imparts to young people from all walks of life. Its Jesuit Catholic identity, coupled with its openness to secular ideas and its large international student population, are among the reasons why students and professors are drawn here. That Georgetown exists today, Ladies and Gentlemen, is the result of tenacity, perseverance and courage.

A bit of history is in order here: With the defeat of the Royalists in the English Civil War in 1646, stringent laws were imposed on the American colonies against Catholic education. The Jesuits, who founded Maryland, were expelled from the colony and their schools were closed. Despite the ban, the Jesuits continued to preserve their schools. Father John Carroll, in whose monumental shadow we stand today, worked in those early schools and he is Georgetown's link to those difficult years.

Looking at Georgetown University today, you would never imagine that there was a time when priests had to hide to educate young students like yourselves. Today, Georgetown is ranked among the elite and

leading universities in the world. This is a testament to the faithfulness of succeeding generations to whom the legacy was passed.

I see a parallel in my own life story, and how I came to be where I am today. The beginning was quite unremarkable. By the time I was your age, I was already married – straight out of high school, I might add – and well on my way to becoming the mother of four sons.

Some of my affluent high school friends were lucky to be able to continue their education, many of them overseas. I, on the other hand, had to go to work – as a secretary and later as an accountant's assistant at a garage – to help make ends meet. Through a series of fortunate circumstances, I was able to earn a degree in business at Madison (Wisconsin) Business College and a Master's of Public Administration from Harvard. I went on to become Liberia's first female Finance Minister of Finance. Eight months into that assignment, however, a violent coup d'état overthrew the government in April 1980, and I was among only four Cabinet Ministers who were not executed by firing squad.

When I became involved in Liberian politics, it was a rough and tumble world of male dominance. Who would have ever thought that rough and tumble would be further to the extreme that it was in my country? As a member of the opposition, I was tried for sedition and sentenced to ten years of hard labor. What was my crime? Criticizing a military dictatorship! I was released, thanks to domestic and international pressure, but when I was later re-arrested for refusing to take my seat in the Legislature in protest against a stolen election, I was jailed, mistreated and almost raped. But I persevered, in fact with a significant amount of help from two Hoyas in the audience today.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen, Class of 2010:**

I tell you this story so you can see that, back then, nobody had any inkling that I would one day become the first democratically elected female President in Africa. The principles that gave me my chance are the same principles that gave us Georgetown University – perseverance, tenacity and the willingness to pay the price for what you believe, and most importantly, the determination to serve others. This is true, whether

in colonial America of the 1600s, in Liberia in the 1970s, or in Washington, D.C. in 2010.

Class of 2010: Despite the many troubled experiences and adversities, I kept returning to Liberia because I believed that my country was better than its recent history indicated, and I believed in the possibility of Liberia and its people. In 1997, I contested the elections in Liberia against Charles Taylor and lost. The people who voted for him did so, fearing further turmoil should he lose. Undeterred, I ran for President again in 2005 and won. As always, I was the sole competitive woman in a field dominated by men.

Like Father John Carroll and the Jesuit priests who built this great University, I, too, will have to turn over my life's work to the next generation. And as far apart as our countries, eras and circumstances are, there are still similarities. The importance of the continuation of legacy cannot be overemphasized. If the generations that came after Father Carroll had not preserved and improved on his work, we would not be at this event. Who would have ever thought that Georgetown would not be led by a priest or that a woman would be the Dean of the School of Foreign Service! It is precisely for that reason that what we are doing here today is so vital, so relevant.

I am an optimist, and I urge you to see life that way. That's the only way we can invest our lives in a purpose greater than ourselves. We have to maintain the belief that the generation to which we pass this legacy will be as faithful as we were.

My generation has had great successes as well as colossal failures. Throughout the decades of the eighties and nineties, the violent overthrow of governments and bloody civil wars were the norm in Africa. Today, most African countries are democracies, and although far from perfect, they are a vast improvement on previous decades. It is essential that succeeding generations build on our successes and sidestep our mistakes.

This is not always guaranteed; and that is why we teach, we guide, we lead and we mentor the young. We cannot be complacent in the relative

success we have seen, because complacency is the worst enemy of progress.

Let me cite an example: The Sunday, May 9, *New York Times* ran back-to-back articles on how the war against HIV/AIDS is being lost in Africa; how the hard-earned progress achieved in reducing HIV infection and prolonging the lives of those with AIDS is receding. A decade ago, Uganda became the poster child for how HIV/AIDS could be confronted. A decade ago, fewer than 10,000 Ugandans were on anti-retroviral drugs; today, nearly 200,000 are receiving treatment. Moreover, drugs that once cost \$12,000 a year now cost less than \$100.

But these successes are in retreat. The so-called “golden window” for treatment is closing. There is now a shortfall in funding to pay for treatment for the sick in Uganda. Grants are expiring, funds are frozen, and drug shortages will soon affect Nigeria, Swaziland, Botswana, Tanzania and Kenya. A decade ago, the conventional wisdom assumed that the world would continue to make advances in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Today, whatever progress was made is under threat of being rolled back.

### **Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen:**

Sometimes the events that alter our circumstances are beyond our control. One of the reasons for the shortage of funds in the treatment of AIDS has been the global financial crisis. When the crisis first began, some people in Africa assumed that because the African financial sector was not involved in the exotic products that brought down the world economy, we would weather the downturn. Our relative lack of integration into the global financial grid seemed to indicate that we would be spared the spread of the contagion.

That assumption proved wrong, because when the credit markets froze, everyone was affected. Investors who had planned multi-million-dollar investments in countries like Liberia no longer had access to credit, or had to pay outrageous interest rates. They were forced to scale back on their goals. In Liberia’s case, 90 percent of its export revenues were collected from the sale of rubber. With the recession, the demand for,

and price of, rubber declined by staggering amounts and, along with it, our revenues.

What began on Wall Street suddenly impacted our ability to maintain the fragile peace in post-conflict Liberia. Everything we had worked so hard to achieve was threatened by an event far from our shores. No doubt, some of you will leave here for jobs on Wall Street. Bear in mind that what you do there and in other financial hubs will have far-reaching consequences for us in Liberia and countries in similar circumstances.

The work we have done to promote democracy is also your heritage. It is a legacy we will pass on to you in an increasingly interconnected world. The legacy I worked for in Liberia will be yours to preserve as much as it is for the young people in my country. We have inherited each other's strengths and weaknesses. Our response to crisis will have to be shared. This is the awesome and equally exciting responsibility you must eventually assume.

We must collectively uphold and build on our successes, values and traditions, while avoiding the mistakes of the past. Rabbi Hillel, the tenth-century Jewish religious leader, is credited with saying that the greatest honor we can pay to the past is to avoid its mistakes. Across Africa, many democracy advocates find inspiration in the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He, in turn, took inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence. Today, the world over, the life and work of Nelson Mandela continue to inspire millions of people. And the work of your own President, Barack Obama, lays the groundwork for a whole new generation recognizing that in diversity there is opportunity.

Everywhere I travel – whether in Asia, Europe or the Americas – I meet young women who tell me that my story has inspired them. They have never been to Liberia; some had never heard of Liberia before I became President. Yet, their aspirations find resonance in my story. Together we have built a shared legacy of values: respect for human rights, freedom of speech, gender equality, protection of the environment, etc. Your responsibility, when you leave here today, will be to strengthen and improve upon that collective legacy.

## **Members of the Graduating Class of 2010:**

That's why you are here, and what this moment represents. Four years of classes, deadlines and extensions. Four years of courses you really didn't like, tests you didn't want to take, and papers you would rather not have written. But every moment was necessary, whether you appreciate it now or later – moments of bonding, of mentorship, of mistakes, and learning in and outside the classroom. Some of the bonds forged in these halls will endure for the rest of your lives whether it be on K Street or back in Monrovia on Broad Street.

You have had an opportunity to be exposed to beliefs and ideas with which you disagreed. You have also had the chance to defend your values and beliefs to people who did not share them. Hopefully, those beliefs were either strengthened or reassessed when they did not stand up to scrutiny and evidence. All of this was for a reason, and today is the beginning of that reason. You are the heirs to the social, economic and political structures around you; but, more importantly, the fate of millions of people in our world rests on decisions taken here. Some of you will go on to influence those decisions.

My hope for you is that you will leave this space better than you found it. That is a life worth living, Ladies and Gentlemen, and it has been a driving force for me. Education gave me the power to change my country. You, too, must use the power you have been given to make a difference. My hope and encouragement, as you leave here today, is that you must seek at all times to preserve what is best about humanity and reduce what is worst about us. In that way, you keep alive the legacy which preceding generations have handed to you, so that when your time comes, you will hand it, intact and improved, to succeeding generations.

Congratulations, once again, Georgetown Class of 2010. I wish you a successful and productive life and career!

I thank you.