

**Commencement Address. Morehouse College**  
***“Now, what is expected of you”***  
**by Jeh Charles Johnson, Secretary of Homeland Security**  
**Atlanta, Georgia May 18, 2014**

President Wilson, Chairman Davidson and other members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, alumni, members of the Morehouse community, graduates, and, most of all, the family members here who prayed and worked hard to see your son, grandson, brother, nephew, or cousin get to this day. ...

I begin by expressing my great optimism about the future of Morehouse College, with my friend and classmate John Wilson as its new leader. I am so glad I lost that election for senior class president 36 years ago. I lost to the superior candidate, which launched him on his trajectory toward the office he holds today. For the last 36 years, it has been obvious to many that John was destined to one day assume the presidency of Morehouse College. He possesses the right combination of academic experience, administrative experience, fundraising tenacity, leadership instincts, charisma, intelligence, evangelical fervor, faith, character, and a love of this school. He is the right man, at the right place, at the right time, for the job.

The better candidate won the presidency; I have finally recovered from my landslide loss, and settled for being a member of the President’s cabinet.

Today I will not deliver some important announcement or major policy address on homeland security or immigration reform. So, if there is any member of the press watching or listening for that reason, you are about to be disappointed.

I want to talk directly to the Morehouse graduates here – you, my brothers, and offer this very personal statement about what this great institution has meant to me and the other alumni you see here, and what it should mean to you for the rest of your life.

As a student, and now a graduate, of Morehouse College, you have chosen to travel the same road that I, John, Spike, Martin, Robert, Charles, Jerome, James, Joel, Greg, Raynard, Train, Rodney, and the other members of the class of 1979 who are here today traveled when we left this institution exactly 35 years ago this weekend. This school and this place mean everything to us. We owe it much, far more than the value of a four-year college education. Morehouse is part of us, and it is a large part of what we have become today.

In August 1975 I arrived here a boy. In May 1979, I left here a man with a mission. In August 1975 I arrived here a shy kid who did not want to be the center of attention. I could never have imagined then speaking in front of a large audience like this.

I was a poor student in high school. In my house, during my high school years, a C was a reason to celebrate. In my entire life, the only time I have ever heard my mother utter a four-letter word was when she opened my report card one afternoon and looked at my grades. In fact, you are looking at someone who never really successfully got beyond 10<sup>th</sup> grade math. I took 9<sup>th</sup> grade math in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and flunked, retook 9<sup>th</sup> grade math in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, took 10<sup>th</sup> grade math in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, took 11<sup>th</sup> grade math in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and flunked the New York State regents exam for the 11<sup>th</sup> grade course. My high school guidance counselor told my mother she should think about two-year college for her son. I was tuned out and didn't care. My mother knew I could do better. She was distraught. But, my father, in his quiet and calm wisdom, prodded me to think about Morehouse College.

By good fortune, I visited Morehouse homecoming weekend. I could feel the energy and excitement on this campus, I saw the proud young black men who walk this campus. I was impressed at the sight and sound of several hundred black men singing in unison about pledging their life to this institution, and ties more brotherly. I also got a look at the ladies across the street. Though I had never been here before in my life, something about this place was calling me.

But, by the time I arrived here in August 1975, I was still in a fog. I still hadn't caught fire. Freshman week I recall filling out an index card in Robert Hall with some basic personal information. I got to the line that asked "major" and I did not even know what to put down – I did not even know then what I was interested in studying here. I looked at my father, who said, for lack of an obvious choice, just write in "political science". I spent freshman year here pretty much as I had the years before, asleep academically. My GPA my first year was 1.8. Both semesters: 1.8.

But something was stirring inside. I listened to the sermons and the speeches. I sat in assembly on Tuesdays and chapel on Thursday. I realized I was in a special place, a kingdom. I became proud of who I was and what I was about to become.

But, for those of us who were freshman here in 1975, something was missing. The ambition, the energy and the talent was here, but the great struggles of the civil rights movement – the marches, the sit-ins, the freedom rides – were largely over. We in the class of 1979 were, quite literally, rebels without a cause. We looked for anything about which to protest or march. We eagerly accepted Marty's invitations to Mrs. King's home on Sunset Avenue to plan marches for a state holiday on Dr. King's birthday.

The most frequent objects of our protests, however, were food. The food at Morehouse College in the 1970's was terrible. To those graduating today, I assure you it was a lot worse then. We were served in green trays, with 5 compartments in them, the

size of TV dinners. No seconds. By 9:00 every evening, I was hungry again, and had to have a second dinner at Church's Chicken.

By our senior year, Dr. Gloster was glad to see the Class of '79 leave his school. But, not without one more fight. Dr. Gloster had invited a civil rights leader of national stature to be our commencement speaker. We told Dr. Gloster his choice was not acceptable. To us, the speaker was too mainstream. So, in 1979, our baccalaureate speaker was Louis Farahkan, and our commencement speaker was Joshua Nkomo, the leader of the revolutionary movement in Zimbabwe.

For me, the four years were transformational. I told you that my freshman year GPA was 1.8. By sophomore year something had awakened within me. I found who I was here. I became comfortable in my own skin, and proud of my own skin color.

I recall early the fall semester of my sophomore year. Sitting in Room 217 of what was then Thurmond Hall, now LLC, and realizing there was nothing left for me to do but study. I wanted to go to law school, and be prepared to answer a call to service. My GPA that fall semester went from 1.8 to 3.0; spring semester, sophomore year 3.5; fall semester, junior year 4.0; spring semester, junior year, 4.0; fall semester, senior year, 4.0; and spring semester, senior year, 4.0. I left Morehouse College on fire, went through Columbia Law School with decent grades, and received a job offer from almost every Wall Street law firm I interviewed with.

I am proud of my private sector achievements. I am proud to have been the first African-American partner at one of the most profitable law firms in the United States. I am proud to be a Fellow in the prestigious American College of Trial Lawyers.

But, what I learned on this campus was that something even more is expected of a Morehouse Man.

This is why, on November 22, 2006, when another black man with an unusual first name called to ask me to support his long-shot presidential campaign, I knew how to answer that call. With the education I received here -- an education that cannot be obtained anywhere in the Ivy leagues -- I knew then I was being asked to be a participant in history. Dr. Mays taught us that we all only have a moment, but there is an eternity in it. So, I recognized on November 22, 2006 that I had to make the momentous choice. Enter the word "momentous" in any thesaurus and you get the words "decisive," "important," "significant," "vital," "big," "crucial," "historic," "earth-shattering" -- all the things expected of a Morehouse Man. That is why on November 22, 2006, despite the long odds associated with his candidacy, I told Senator Obama, "Barack, if you run, I am with you."

## FINAL

So, I stand before you as a former C and D student, but who, by virtue of the education and inspiration I received at this place, is today a member of President Barack Obama's cabinet, the head of a government agency of 240,000 people, and the guardian of this nation's homeland security.

Today you are hereby crowned a shining black prince, anointed with the title Morehouse Man, propelled by the pride of your family, entrusted with the legacy of the great Morehouse men who precede you, and saddled with a load of expectations.

Being a Morehouse Man means more than acquiring a good job, good manners, and a good suit.

While others fear the darkness, you must light the candle.

While others wallow in bigotry, intolerance or homophobia, you must provide enlightenment.

When others are content to deliver courage by proxy, you must step to the front of the line.

Our society continues to need the power of your leadership and the power of your example.

Over the last four years, each time you sang *Dear Old Morehouse*, you pledged your life to this institution and its ideals, in all things that you do – whether it's to lead a non-violent social movement, help a brother become president, serve in his cabinet, serve in the military, preach the word of God, Teach for America, teach Sunday school, serve as a substance abuse adviser, serve as your brother's keeper, or simply show someone where he's traveling wrong.

One more thing: you leave Morehouse today but do not leave it behind. Today is your last day at Morehouse, but it's the first day you can start to give back. The future of this school depends on its alumni. I know I speak for every alumnus at this event when I say we look forward to seeing your names next to ours on the list of alumni donors – large or small – whatever you are capable of doing.

To those who become Morehouse Men, much is required. Thank you.