

Text of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's speech

Harvard Commencement remarks (as prepared for delivery)

H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of the Republic of Liberia, delivered her address at the Afternoon Exercises at Harvard's 360th Commencement on May 26, 2011.

President Drew Gilpin Faust, members of the Harvard Board of Overseers, members of the Harvard Corporation, faculty, staff and students, fellow alumni, members of the graduating Class of 2011, parents, family and friends, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, friends:

I am honored not only to be the 360th Commencement speaker at my alma mater, but to do so in the year Harvard University celebrates 375 years of preparing minds as the oldest institution of higher learning in America. Thank you for the invitation and congratulations to you, Dr. Faust, the first female president of Harvard! It is a great privilege to share in Harvard's distinguished and storied history. Harvard has produced presidents, prime ministers, a United Nations secretary-general, leaders in business, government, and the church. But more than anything, Harvard has produced the men and women on whose talent our societies function — the leaders in law, health, business, government, design, education, spirituality, and thought.

An event four decades ago put me on the path that has led me to where I am today. I participated, as a junior official of Liberia's Department of Treasury, in a national development conference sponsored by our National Planning Council and a team of Harvard advisers working with Liberia. My remarks, which challenged the status

quo, landed me in my first political trouble. The head of the Harvard team, recognizing, in a closed society, the potential danger I faced, facilitated the process that enabled me to become a Mason Fellow at the Kennedy School of Government. The Mason Program provided me with the opportunity to study a diversified curriculum for a master's degree in public administration. Perhaps more importantly, in terms of preparation for leadership, the program enabled us to learn and interact with other Fellows and classmates who represented current and potential leaders from all continents.

I engaged, thrilled to be among the world's best minds, yet overwhelmed by the reality of being a part of the world's most prestigious institution of learning. As a result, I did things that I should have done, like studying hard, going to the stacks to do the research for the many papers and for better knowledge of the history of my country. I notice a few blank stares — evidence of the generation gap — so let me explain: the *stacks* contained *books*, which people used to write, and other people used to read, before Google Scholar was created. I also did things that I should not have done, like exposing myself to frostbite when I joined students much younger than I to travel by bus to Washington, D.C., to demonstrate against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

It is difficult to imagine achieving all that I have, without the opportunity to study at Harvard. It is, therefore, for me a profound honor to be counted as an alumna. I salute my fellow graduates who share that rich heritage of academic excellence and the pursuit of truth.

In preparation for this Address, I was pleasantly surprised to learn how far back Liberia's connection to Harvard goes. The establishment of the Liberia College (now

the University of Liberia) in 1862, the second-oldest institution of higher learning in West Africa, was led and funded by the Trustees of Donations for Education in Liberia. Simon Greenleaf, the Harvard College law professor who drafted Liberia's Independence Constitution of 1847, was the founder and president of the Trustees of Donations for Education in Liberia.

The first Liberian graduate of Harvard did so in 1920, and since then there has been a steady trail of Liberians to Cambridge. Most of them returned home to pursue successful careers.

Thank you, Harvard, and thank you to the many Mason Program professors, dead and alive, for the compliments you paid when my papers and interventions were top rate, and for the patience you showed when I struggled with quantitative analysis.

The self-confidence, sometimes called arrogance, that comes from being a Harvard graduate can also lead one down a dangerous path. It did for me. One year after my return from Cambridge, I was at it again, in a Commencement Address at my high school alma mater. I questioned the government's failure to address long-standing inequalities in the society. This forced me into exile and a staff position at the World Bank. Other similar events would follow in a life of in and out of country, in and out of jail, in and out of professional service. There were times when I thought death was near, and times when the burden of standing tall by one's conviction seemed only to result in failure. But through it all, my experience sends a strong message that failure is just as important as success.

Today I stand proud, as the first woman president of my country, Liberia. This has allowed me to lead the processes of change, change needed to address a long-standing environment characterized by awesome challenges: a collapsed economy,

huge domestic and external debt arrears, dysfunctional institutions, destroyed infrastructure, poor regional and international relationships, and social capital destroyed by the scourge of war.

After election, I moved quickly in mobilizing our team, sought support from partners, and tackled the challenges. In five years, we formulated the laws and policies and strategies for growth and development. We removed the international sanctions on our primary exports; introduced and made public a cash-based budget; increased revenue by over 400 percent; and mobilized foreign direct investment worth 16 times the size of the economy when I assumed office. We built a small and professional army and coast guard, and moved the economy from negative growth to average around 6 percent. We have virtually eliminated a \$4.9 billion external debt, settled a large portion of international institutional debt, as well as domestic arrears and suppliers' credit. We restored electricity and pipe-borne water, lacking in the capital for two decades; reconstructed two modern universities and rural referral hospitals; constructed or reconstructed roads, bridges, schools, training institutions, local government facilities, and courts throughout the country; established and strengthened the institutional pillars of integrity; decentralized education by establishing community colleges; brought back the Peace Corps; and mobilized financial and technical resources from U.S. foundations, sororities, and individuals for support of programs aimed at the education of girls, the empowerment of adolescent youth, and improved working conditions for market women.

Nevertheless, the challenges for sustained growth and development remain awesome. Our stability is threatened by the thousands of returnees from U.S. prisons and regional refugee camps, the bulk of whom are lacking in technical skills.

Our peace is threatened by the challenging neighborhood where we live: two of our three neighbors have either experienced, or narrowly avoided, civil war in the past year, and we patiently host their refugees, since not even a decade ago it was they who hosted so many of us. Implementation of our economic development agenda is constrained by low implementation and absorptive capacity, which means that we are not constrained by funding alone. Plans to enhance performance in governance move slower than desired due to long-standing institutional decay and a corrupted value system of dishonesty and dependency. The development of infrastructure is constrained by the high capital cost of restoration, brought about by the lack of maintenance and exacerbated by wanton destruction over two decades of conflict.

Yet, today, we are proud that young Liberian children are back in school, preparing themselves to play a productive part in the new Liberian society. Our seven-year-olds do not hear guns and do not have to run. They can smile again. We can thus say with confidence that we have moved our war-torn nation from turmoil to peace, from disaster to development, from dismay to hope. And it was the Liberian women who fought the final battle for peace, who came, their number and conviction the only things greater than their diversity, to demonstrate for the end to our civil war. I am, therefore, proud to stand before you, humbled by the success in representing the aspirations and expectations of Liberian women, African women, and, I dare to say, women worldwide.

Today I stand equally proud, as the first woman president of our African continent, a continent that has embraced the process of change and transformation. I am proud that Liberia became a beacon of hope in Africa. With few notable exceptions, Africa is no longer a continent of countries with corrupt big men who rule with iron fists. It

is no longer the Dark Continent in continual economic free fall, wallowing in debt, poverty and disease.

When he addressed the Ghanaian Parliament in 2009, President Barack Obama reminded the people of Africa that it would no longer be the great men of the past who would transform the continent. The future of all of our countries is in the hands of the young people, people like you, Obama said, “brimming with talent and energy and hope, who can claim the future that so many in previous generations never realized.”

While many challenges persist, times have changed and the world you enter today, graduates of the Class of 2011, is much more accountable than the one we faced. At the beginning of this year, 17 elections were scheduled across our continent. In 1989, there were three democracies in sub-Saharan Africa; by 2008, there were 23. That is progress. This is a significant improvement from the days when violent overthrows were the default means of transition. A clear example stands out in West Africa. Although they did not get as much focus as postelection violence in Côte d’Ivoire, Niger and Guinea proved exemplary where the military oversaw democratic elections, turned power over to the civilian government, and returned to the barracks. In the case of Côte d’Ivoire, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union recognized a nonincumbent as the legitimate winner. That, again, is progress.

We also see evidence of this progress in the African economy, which has been growing at more than 5 percent over the past decade. A recent African Development Bank report measured the rise of the middle class in Africa, totaling 313 million out of 1 billion Africans. The countries experiencing exceptional growth in their middle

class include Ghana, Mozambique, Mali, Tanzania, Cape Verde, Botswana, Burkina Faso, and Rwanda. This middle class is changing the face of Africa. We are moving away from dependence on extractive industries and agriculture. There is a rising consumer class that helped brace Africa during the global economic crisis. This is emblematic not only of the progress in purchasing power in Africa, but in the progress that means you can still put food on the table for your family when the rains fail, that you can engage intelligently in political debates and hold your leaders accountable.

Instability and years of conflict in Liberia have pushed us to the bottom of this table in terms of the size of our middle class. We stubbornly refuse to accept this and are preparing a new development agenda that aims, through proper allocation of our natural resources, to graduate Liberia from development assistance in 10 years, and propels us to a middle-income country by 2030.

As Africa charts its economic path, we are taking advantage of South-South partnerships as China, India, and Brazil, not to mention Nigeria and Ghana, become more significant partners in our economic expansion. Their experience is closer to ours, and our cooperation going forward will be crucial.

Even as the African renaissance appears on course, we must recognize that some of this progress is driven by the same forces of commodity demand that led to temporary gains four decades ago. We are the source of raw materials, now to India and China as well as the Western world, yet we generate the least profits from these exhaustible resources. Moreover, we remain vulnerable to external price shocks and receive very little transfer of technology, or growth in related industries. Until we begin to make products to sell, build better road and rail systems, and improve the

easy movement of people and goods across our borders; until we supply the engineers and geologists and marketers of our resources, our middle class will remain stunted.

In spite of these needs, and the fundamental economics of resource extraction, everywhere I travel in Africa, I see signs of a continent rising. We are producing more, manufacturing more, trading more, and cooperating more. Words like accountability, transparency, and reform are not just the calling card of some foreign donor; they are the words that must adjudicate closed-door decisions for those governments in Africa that seek re-election. There is a growing consensus on these issues, giving me great optimism about the future of Africa's common economy and democratic prospects.

I am excited about Africa's future, and more so about Liberia's future. In a few months, the Liberian people will have the opportunity to select their political leadership. This means that Liberia will know a second peaceful democratic transition in six years: this in a country that was riven by political rivalries, tribalism, and civil war for two decades. It is, nonetheless, with cautious optimism that we approach this event and the future. Anxieties remain because we know that as impressive as Liberia's rebirth has been, our achievements remain fragile and reversible.

I have no personal anxieties, however, for in a decades-long career in public service, I have learned many lessons that I can share with you today. In my journey, I have come to value hope and resilience. As an actor in Liberia's history as it has unfolded over the last 40 years, I have seen these characteristics come full circle. I was there in the early '70s, a decade after the independence movement had swept across

Africa. Back then, the future appeared full of endless possibilities. Then across the continent there was a gradual descent into militarism, sectarian violence, and divisive ethnic politics. But I have been blessed with the opportunity to watch and participate as not only my nation but other African countries rise out of the ashes of war. With cautious optimism, it is my hope that I will continue to lead Liberia to consolidate and realize the dividends of peace.

As much as I have lived and experienced, what you graduates will know and do will far exceed it. History, it seems, is speeding up. After graduation, you leave the relative security, predictability, and certainty of these walls for a world full of uncertainties. Across the globe, entire societies are being transformed, new identities forged, and national stories retold. People your age across the world are becoming increasingly vocal about how they are governed and by whom. Old templates of control have been overturned as States struggle internally with issues about national character and destiny. People who, heretofore, had no say in those conversations are asserting themselves and taking a place at the table, with or without an invitation.

Ten years ago, information about the tragic events of September 11 came to us mainly through traditional media: radio, television, and ... cnn.com. There was no Facebook, no YouTube, no Twitter and all the other social networking sites that my grandchildren now take for granted. In the intervening 10 years, young people like yourselves have gone on to use technology to improve the overall quality of life and created wealth. In those 10 years, the world has become smaller and more connected. The complex financial instruments of 10 years ago would seem quaint to the hedge funds and investment banks of today. In those 10 years, our markets and economies have become more connected and adjusted faster.

Just six months ago, the Tunisian revolution began, leading rapidly and inexorably to fundamental change across North Africa and the Middle East. Could this have happened without digital social media, or without heightened correlation of food prices across time and space? Could this have happened just 10 years ago, with the same preconditions but a different degree of connectivity? Can you imagine what the next 10 years will bring? The next 50?

In the time even before Friendster succumbed to Facebook, our world went through phases of transformation, and Harvard graduates, students, faculty, and commencement speakers have been key actors, writers, and chroniclers of those changes. In 1947, U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall stood in this very Yard before a graduating class such as this one to announce the plan to salvage Europe after the devastation caused by the Second World War:

He began, “I need not tell you, gentlemen, (I don’t know where the ladies were) that the world situation is very serious. But to speak more seriously” — Marshall said as he went on to advocate the well-known Marshall Plan. In time, we saw a rebounded Europe, and the subsequent rise of East Asia, have been the catalyzing forces behind Africa’s own recent progress.

When President John F. Kennedy, another Harvard graduate, spoke to this audience in 1956 as the junior senator from Massachusetts, he analyzed the tension between politicians and intellectuals. Of the politicians, Kennedy said, “We need both the technical judgment and the disinterested viewpoint of the scholar, to prevent us from becoming imprisoned by our own slogans.” In newly democratic societies, where ballots are marked with distinctive icons as well as names since many voters remain illiterate, the danger of sloganeering political populism is only greater, and

can lead down the road of war, not just bad policy choices. Kennedy, of course, would go on to launch the Peace Corps, which has impacted the lives of millions throughout the world by bringing Americans across the ocean, teaching students and training teachers, and making our world a smaller place.

Ralph Ellison, speaking at the 1974 Commencement, told the graduates and alumni: “Let us not be dismayed, let us not lose faith simply because the correctives we have set in motion, and you have set in motion, took a long time.” Ellison believed that despite the challenge, the chance for national regeneration was there.

In the more recent past, Bill Gates, a famous Harvard attendee, has made our world smaller still by having all of us speak the same dialect, by connecting us electronically and opening doors that just one generation ago seemed to belong to the realm of science fiction. Today, because of him, we are closer to living in a global village.

With the election of Harvard graduate Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States, the face of American politics has been altered for good. In the sea change that his election represents, let me remind you, America, that Liberia has you beat on one score: We elected our first female president, perhaps 11 years before the United States might do so.

Today, I share more than a Harvard background with you. In a way, this is also a commencement year for me. Just as you end one journey today and begin the next, so too do I in November. As my first term as the president of Liberia comes to an end, I will be standing for re-election. The person who claims to be the strongest opposition contender is a Harvard graduate. But I want you to know that the

incumbent, who is also a Harvard graduate, is determined to win. The relationship between Harvard and Liberia is thus secured and in good hands!

Harvard Graduates, Class of 2011: I urge you to be fearless about the future. Just because something has not been done yet, doesn't mean it can't be. I was never deterred from running for president just because there had never been any females elected head of state in Africa. Simply because political leadership in Liberia had always been a "boys' club" didn't mean it was right, and I was not deterred. Today, an unprecedented number of women hold leadership positions in our country, and we intend to increase that number.

As you approach your future, there will be ample opportunity to become jaded and cynical, but I urge you to resist cynicism — the world is still a beautiful place and change is possible. As I have noted here today, my path to the presidency was never straightforward or guaranteed. Prison, death threats, and exile provided every reason to quit, to forget about the dream, yet I persisted, convinced that my country and people are so much better than our recent history indicates. Looking back on my life, I have come to appreciate its difficult moments. I believe I am a better leader, a better person with a richer appreciation for the present because of my past.

The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them. If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough. If you start off with a small dream, you may not have much left when it is fulfilled because along the way, life will task your dreams and make demands on you. I am, however, bullish about the future of our world because of you. We share one defining characteristic that prepares us to transform our world — we are all Harvard University graduates.

When we add to that the traditional quests for excellence for which we are known, there is no telling what we can accomplish.

Go forth and embrace a future that awaits you.

I thank you.