

REMARKS FOR ADMINISTRATOR BOLDEN

OUTSTANDING LEADER AWARD

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR URBAN DEBATE LEAGUES

April 12, 2012

Thank you, Dr. (Elizabeth) Garrett. It's been many years since we first became associated with each other at the University of Southern California, but we're both, in our own way, still heavily involved with education. Thank you, Secretary Duncan, for all you continue to do for students of all backgrounds and abilities, no matter where they live in this great and broad country of ours.

Let me also say thank you to the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues for the invitation to be a part of this event tonight and to be recognized by the organization. It's quite humbling and an honor to be the first recipient of the Outstanding Leader Award. I will strive to live up to your expectations of me.

You do great work getting students and their supporters involved in something that raises everyone's sights toward accomplishment and learning through the challenge of debate and that's a great thing.

Congratulations to all of you debaters who have reached this national level. Good luck in the competitions in the days ahead. I have a sense of how much hard work and sacrifice you've put into this activity; how passionate you have become; and I commend you for your persistence and dedication. It's not always easy, but there are rewards for staying focused on things like debate, that both opens and sharpens your mind.

I'm so heartened to read about the positive impact that debating is having on students who often come from backgrounds where they may not have had a chance to excel, where poverty, race, and other factors can play such a big role in determining success.

What you young men and women are doing is fantastic preparation for college, and I know most, if not all, of you are planning to continue your studies in the years ahead. Setting your goals high, having a dream to pursue – these are big deals, and I wish you all the best. Don't take what you have achieved for granted. Treat it with care, humility, and love. Many of you will be the history-making members of your families.

Now, of course, I'm hoping many of you will also choose the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields that are going to be so essential to our nation's competitiveness in the future. But the humanities and many other disciplines are also essential for understanding the human facet to our new discoveries and capabilities and helping us, yes, debate, where we want to go next as a people.

My parents were lifelong educators, and they instilled in me a strong desire to pursue my education vigorously – with passion and dedication, much the same as they had lived their lives. Your education is not a detached part of your life; it's integral to who you are and who you will become.

I grew up in the segregated South. I love South Carolina, but believe me, it was not always an easy place hold onto big dreams and reach for that higher self, so I was incredibly blessed to have my parents there to push me and encourage me. My father was a high school teacher and football coach – my high school coach – and my mother was a librarian – my middle school librarian. We didn't have a lot of money, but my brother and I grew up rich in another important way because of the passion for learning instilled in us by our parents. They held us to high standards for conduct and achievement.

As I approached high school graduation, I wanted to go to the U.S. Naval Academy, serve in the military, and follow in the footsteps of my father and uncles and many other Black men who served with distinction in World War II – if not always with recognition. Due to the staunch segregation of the South, I was unable to get the needed appointment to the Academy, but I believed my mom and dad when they told me I could do anything I wanted if I was willing to work hard, fight, and be persistent. Fortunately for me, President Lyndon B. Johnson paid attention to the letters of a boy from South Carolina and I eventually received an appointment from a Congressman named William Dawson of Illinois. Rep. Dawson was himself a veteran of World War I, and only the third African American elected to Congress in the 20th century. He was the only serving Black member of Congress during his first term.

Needless to say, things have really changed since those days of my youth. I have the honor today of being the first African American Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration – NASA – 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 Carver Theater, the only movie house in my town for Blacks.

As I always do when I speak to young people like you today – you who I hope will take the gains that previous generations have made and make your own progress – I urge you: don't waste your time trying to explain yourself, your identity, to anyone, nor try to justify why you are where you are, 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 the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 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.

You are very lucky to have mentors in this organization who are helping guide your efforts. Take advantage of their experience, and listen to them, even when they tell you what you might not want to hear. I was lucky to have the late, great Dr. Ron McNair as such a fortunate presence in my life. When I first met him, I had already graduated from the Naval Academy and embarked on my military career for 12 years. He convinced me that I should apply to the astronaut corps. It wasn't something I'd really considered and at the time I simply dismissed the idea. But Ron was a persuasive person, and after talking with him, the idea grew on me.

I probably don't need to tell you that becoming an astronaut changed my life markedly. I flew four times into space.

Unfortunately, Ron perished as a member of the *Challenger* crew in the very next mission after my first flight into space aboard *Columbia* in January 1986.

He and the rest of that crew were personal friends, and that kind of loss and sacrifice is something you never forget. It's one reason why, when President Obama asked me to become NASA Administrator, I decided to postpone my "transition" – as my wife calls retirement – and help bring our space program to the next level of innovation – to honor the commitments of people like Ron, and the many thousands of people who worked tirelessly to make the space shuttle and all of our exploration work so amazing.

So, when you debate over the coming days whether **the United States federal government should substantially increase its exploration and/or development of space beyond the Earth's mesosphere**, I'm glad to see that at least you are not debating the question of whether or not we should explore at all. I know you have been thoughtfully considering this question in many venues all year.

You know where I stand on the issue, and I could give those of you arguing the pro side a lot of fuel for your fire, but I'm just happy that there is so much constructive dialogue going on.

At the heart of your debates is a passion to understand, to be heard, to be part of something greater, and make a difference. We can't ask for anything more of you than that. That spirit drew me into public service and led me into space, and I have had a most blessed life. If you are true to that instinct in yourselves that drew you to debating, you can have the same. So dream big, set your goals high, and never give up on yourselves!

Thank you.