

Charles Bolden, NASA Administrator

Mount Vernon High School Commencement

Alexandria, VA

June 20, 2014

Thank you, Anwar Muhammad for that gracious introduction and for your outstanding success as a student and a student leader here at Mount Vernon High. I also want to thank Principal, Nardos [NAR-DIS] King and the entire Mount Vernon High School family – faculty, staff, students, legislators, school board, Board of Supervisors, representatives and especially the parents of the graduates for the opportunity to share this special moment with you today.

It may not seem like it right now, but you graduates are the generation that will ensure that this nation lives up to its promise as a beacon of freedom, hope and prosperity for our citizens and for the rest of the world.

You are the ones who will build bridges of understanding and cooperation in the 21st century that are strong enough for everyone here in America and around the world to cross.

That is what I want to spend a few minutes talking with you about this morning: The incredible opportunity you have as students and, very soon now, graduates of this great high school to build lives of purpose and meaning for yourselves, for your families and communities and for our nation. I also want to let you know that as NASA launches itself into a new era of spaceflight and scientific discovery, there may be a place for you in America's growing aerospace industry if you continue to prepare yourself well.

I understand that your school theme is "Building a Culture of Excellence." That is a journey that began when you came here four years ago and will continue for the rest of your lives.

It is also a journey that has led many of you far from your native homes to create one of the most racially and culturally diverse high schools in the nation. I understand that more than 50 countries and 30 languages are represented in this school. That multicultural makeup of your student body and your experiences here give you an extraordinary advantage as you enter college or pursue other goals in a world that is more diverse than at any time in history. But it also offers some challenges too.

Let me tell you a little bit about my own journey.

Whenever I am asked what led me to pursue a career as a Marine, an astronaut, and to accept the President's appointment as Administrator of NASA, I think back to my days growing up in the segregated schools of Columbia, South Carolina. My mother, father, mother-in-law, and father-in-law were all teachers. I also wanted to follow in the footsteps of my father and my uncles – men who had served with distinction in World War II.

So, I guess you could say my passion for education and public service is part of my DNA.

In addition to the compassionate, loving guidance of my parents, I will never forget the lessons instilled in me by my teachers at Columbia's Carver Elementary, W.A. Perry Middle School, and C.A. Johnson High School. They not only taught me the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic; they taught me the hard facts of life and impressed upon me that no matter the odds; I should stay in school and follow my dreams. I took that advice to heart and it has given me the strength to break barriers and achieve goals that were unthinkable for a southern born African American 60 years ago.

My journey began like yours – with an education that helped me expand my interest and knowledge about science, engineering and aviation while also nurturing my desire to be of service to my country.

That is the legacy of Mount Vernon High School, where the emphasis has been on educating the whole person through a combined concentration on academics, community service and leadership development.

I am also impressed with your school's emphasis on science, technology, engineering and math or the STEM disciplines. As you know, STEM jobs and STEM workers are absolutely essential to America's technological leadership and economic growth in the 21st century.

We all know about the jobs crisis that has been plaguing our nation. But it is a little known fact that while 12 million Americans are unemployed, more than half-a-million manufacturing jobs are unfilled right now simply because companies can't find enough trained scientists, engineers and technicians to do the work.

All of this is occurring in a world where emerging economies are surging ahead and education has become the fault line between success and failure. Clearly this is an American crisis, but it is one we can solve.

President Obama has repeatedly stressed the importance of growing America's STEM workforce and he has set a goal of recruiting, retaining, and graduating 10,000 engineers each year to maintain America's competitive edge.

He has also taken major steps to make college more affordable. Just last week, the President signed a new law that makes it easier for students to pay back their federal college loans. That may not mean that much to you right now, but the fact is because of the high cost of college, about two-thirds of graduates take out loans with an average student debt of over \$23,000.

To ease that burden, starting this year new borrowers will pay no more than 10 percent of their disposable income after college graduation. The law also allows any remaining debt to be forgiven after 20 years. And those of you who choose public service careers, such as teachers, nurses or members of the armed forces will have any remaining debt forgiven after 10 years if you make your payments on time.

Finally, let me say that at NASA we're also building a "Culture of Excellence." Our vision is "*to reach for new heights and reveal the unknown so that what we do and learn will benefit all humankind.*" NASA needs you to fulfill that vision.

We need engineers to help us design the new rockets and capsules that will take us to Mars and farther into the solar system than we've ever been.

We need scientists and researchers to help us develop materials to withstand the stresses of deep space exploration, to sustain humans for long duration stays in space, to make air transportation quicker, safer and more efficient, and to aid us in our quest to unravel the mysteries of the cosmos and learn more about our own planet. We also need communication strategists and writers and graphic designers to help us tell our story. And we need managers and administrative assistants to make it all happen.

As NASA takes its next great leap into deep space exploration, we are determined that American workers and American companies lead the way. That means you! NASA needs you! America needs you! You are the keys to growing our economy, strengthening our nation's competitive edge and winning the future.

But whatever field you choose to pursue, my wife Jackie and I have always given our children this advice: dream big dreams; do what you want to do; don't listen to anyone who tells you can't do something or you don't belong; do your job and do it very well; and don't let the opportunity to make a difference in your world pass you by. And Class of 2014, always remember and value your diversity...America's diversity is our greatest strength.

As we approach the July celebration of 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and next year, the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, I am reminded that on March 7, 1965 on a bridge entering Selma, Alabama, 600 civil rights marchers were attacked and brutally beaten simply because they were marching for their own basic human rights. At the head of that march across the Edmund-Pettus Bridge was John Lewis, today a member of the Georgia Congressional delegation.

Eight days after the attack, President Lyndon B. Johnson came before a joint session of Congress to propose the historic *Voting Rights Act*.

Today, Congressman Lewis likes to say that on the end of the bridge, opposite from the police who attacked the marchers, on that other end is President Barack Obama. I understand his view, but I have another. I believe on the other side of that bridge are...you. For it is your generation that will have the chance – if not the right – to take the hard-won advantages you have inherited from my generation to the next level. Embodied in you are the hopes and dreams and aspirations of a truly united America. It is only as one nation that we will be able to face and conquer the challenges that science and technology have in store for us. And it is our diversity from which true innovation and creativity will ensue.

Class of 2014, I can't tell you with certainty how things will look in ten years, but I expect that many of you will help lead us to a better world. Not just more prosperous...but filled with more fairness, opportunity, freedom, creativity and love. It's been said, "The best way to predict the future is to invent it." That is our mission and this is your moment.

Go Majors!