

United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Office of Public Affairs
Washington, DC
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By

Richard J. Irley, Director
Chairman, Nuclear Regulatory Commission
at

the Howard Foundation Court Annual Conference
American Minorities in Science, Engineering and Mathematics
in the Twenty-First Century
Cambridge, Massachusetts
April 11, 2000

I am deeply appreciative of the recognition that you bestowed on me today. I would like to express my deepest thanks to the Howard Foundation and its distinguished Director, Dr. Ellen Counter, to the Howard Society of Black Scientists and Engineers to its Janis in Medicine, Engineering and Informational Sciences and to Women in Science at Howard Radcliffe. It is also a great pleasure to participate in a conference dedicated to a purpose close to my heart, namely, increasing the participation of women and minorities in science, engineering and mathematics. To see you and to interact with you is particularly gratifying. The recent College Board report on Washington Post's survey on the status of African Americans in American higher education, in addition to revealing a huge gender gap in college attendance and college graduation among African Americans, shows that African Americans lag the majority in receipt of advanced degrees. While white males are the most likely to receive a Ph.D. in addition, the choice of studies for African Americans is not in the sciences. At the graduate level, African men tend to study education and African women tend to concentrate in public administration. Only three percent of the recipients of doctorates are African and only one percent of university faculties are African. It goes without saying that in the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks, an African American, an African alumna and an African trustee to be here with you this afternoon.

Let me interject at this point that while many of my comments will refer to African Americans, I believe that their relevance to other minority groups as well is self-evident. My interest is by no means in the current only of African Americans, rather it is in seeing that at all the historically disadvantaged minorities in this society receive a truly equal chance at educational, professional and personal fulfillment.

As I told you, I am an MBA graduate and I am at the Institute. I must admit that the students had a certain amount of interest about Harvard and Radcliffe, but as almost an article of faith for us that at the time we were tooling around and night in the lab or in the library, those goal-oriented students were not doing better to do it their time than those who were and loll in the sun on the grass in the Charles.

Her actions are exaggerated just a bit.

Actually, in our part of the world, at Harvard and Radcliffe were major institutions and those of us who cared about such things at the time also had begun to take very seriously the need to encourage diversity in their student bodies. I used to be the only one in my class at Radcliffe who was making a determined effort to increase the number of African American applicants. In just six or seven years, the percentage of African Americans in the Radcliffe entering class went from about one percent to almost ten percent. It is also a matter of record that when it came to awarding doctorates to African American women, Radcliffe was the only one who had a policy in the 1970s as many years ahead of the Harvard Foundation. Now, of course, its existence to Harvard's recognition in the era of residential integration of people from across the whole spectrum of society is the fact that must be followed by that of a great and diverse society as a whole.

The years that I spent as an undergraduate in Cambridge were tumultuous, sometimes triumphant and all too often tragic. I remember at the end of the 1960s the story of the Freedom Summer when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became law, hundreds of volunteers of all races went to Mississippi to help African Americans who had been disenfranchised all their lives register to vote for the first time. Not all of those volunteers went home alive. One of the first to be murdered was a friend of mine, Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated. I remember well that the news stories of the African American community, all nine or ten of us, out of a student body of over a hundred, the murder of Robert Kennedy too, place the experience of graduation.

In those years as minority group members pursuing careers in the sciences, engineering, and mathematics, we were acutely conscious of the smallness of our numbers as in some respects a major challenge. It takes a certain critical mass so to speak of members of a group to feel that they form a community that can be supportive of one another and in the early years it was easy to feel isolated at times. Moreover, the universities in that era were still in the process of learning that if they wanted to reach out to minority populations, and then a part of their institutions, their obligations did not end when the acceptance letters went into the mail.

There was another side to the coin of being one of the few people of color in the profession. It was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it was a source of pride and a source of strength. It was a source of pride because we were the first to break through the barriers and to show that we were capable of doing what the white community could do. On the other hand, it was a source of pain and a source of frustration. We were often the only people of color in the room and we were often the only people of color in the class. We were often the only people of color in the office. We were often the only people of color in the family. We were often the only people of color in the neighborhood. We were often the only people of color in the country. We were often the only people of color in the world. We were often the only people of color in the universe. We were often the only people of color in the galaxy. We were often the only people of color in the universe. We were often the only people of color in the universe.

What I am getting at is that in those days, it felt like the movement at its height, it was inclusive. It was a movement that represented the tiny minority of African American students in places like MIT. We would feel a sense of solidarity. It was a movement that was unquestionably a source of strength for us, reinforcing our resolve to achieve our own goals. We felt at times lonely and demoralized or even defeated. The expectations of us, we could remind ourselves that the struggle for equality was being fought on many fronts and that was one of the things we were taking emotional risks. We knew that there were other people like the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and the other leaders and the other people who were taking risks of a more direct kind.

I do not want to minimize at all the role of personal ambition as a catalyst and indeed essential success factor. None of us would have made it out of a strong internal drive to succeed and no one should be ashamed of wanting to succeed and to make a difference in the world so long as that is not all that one cares about. In that context, I remember saying once, "I am not for myself alone, I am for myself alone." I am not for myself alone, I am for myself alone.

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□ do not mean to imply that the argument is a frivolous one or example where there are social issues needing to be addressed it is important to deal with cases of ringing and degrading cases and drafting needed legislation as a way to redress societal inequities or that at least as been a natural way or at least a lac of leaders the question is whether every minority group member entering a profession should be allowed to choose a field of direct and direct or other group

Incidentally it is a little ironic that as a parallel to other countries on the one hand of the NRC encounter as many people with advanced degrees from among the officials of foreign governments as meet in the United States in the same period of time especially in the world people see science and technology as they to bring layers on the world stage and when one looks at their governments again and again one sees officials with advanced degrees prominently in science in the developing countries there are there is no contradiction it been going into science and caring about the social progress of oneself

that leads to the next question is the answer different in a developed society So long as there are pressing social problems needing to be addressed should minority group members in a developed society apply their talents to professions that directly and obviously benefit their own groups and the physics engineering and mathematics to others

could answer that several ways first on an individual level part of what motivates a person to get into a field is to do something one is interested in passionately when a person is calling a career it may be mathematics or American history or French literature one cannot turn one's back on it it is a feeling spiritually inspired to a greater or lesser extent therefore that one cares about most is also likely to be that one does best or one's own fulfillment there are there is much to be said for giving great credit to that at one's own heart and mind are telling him

also could argue that it is good for the nation and for minority groups that the American is an American and American mathematicians scientists and engineers that in all of us there is that the struggle against inequality and discrimination in this country is very far from over or all the gains that have been made there is much more to be done discrimination and racist stereotyping are not ended rather they continue in subtler and more forms than the more obvious and demeaning notion not necessarily articulated out loud that minority group members do not matter at all in certain fields

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