

Shirley Chisholm, "Speech at Howard University"

Thank you very much for that wonderful introduction. Good afternoon, students, I usually speak extemporaneously because I like to see what is happening as I try to bring a message to you. But there's so many things that I have on my mind this afternoon and in the interest of time, as well as to give you the opportunity to ask me any kind of questions you desire, I'm going to read my speech today. At another time when I'm not so pressured, I will speak extemporaneously on many, many things that I want to bring to you from time to time.

While nothing is easy for the black man in America, neither is anything impossible. Like old man river, we are moving along and we will continue to move resolutely until our goal of unequivocal equality is attained. We must not be docile, we must not be resigned, nor must we be inwardly bitter. We must see ourselves in an entirely new perspective and we cannot sit in our homes waiting for someone to reach out and do things for us.

Every tomorrow has two handles; we can take hold of the handle of anxiety, or the handle of faith. And the first battle is won, my brothers and sisters, when we fight for belief in ourselves, and find that it has come to us while we are still battling. We must not allow petty things to color our lives and stimulate them into vast proportions of evil. To dwell on every slight and clutch it close to our breast and nourish it will corrode our thinking. We're on the move now, and as Frederick Douglass said, "Power concedes nothing without a struggle." It never has, and it never will.

The United States can no longer afford the luxury of costly morally, religiously, and ethically wrong racial discrimination. For America needs all of her citizens with their abilities developed to make a fuller contribution to the future. Many problems scream loudly in this country. The thousands of black citizens disenfranchised, living under degrading conditions. The millions of poor in this nation, white and black, who lack the bare rudiments for fruitful living. The rapidly growing numbers of children caught in a web of disillusionment which destroys their will to learn. The increasing numbers of aged who do not even look forward to rest or retirement.

And despite the historic legislation in our cities and our states, nearly eleven million black citizens today still live in basic ghetto communities of our cities. From decades of non-participation, or only modest participation, the black man has within the last two years shifted his goal to full political participation for full American citizenship. And while on the picket line at the lunch counter and on the bus and the store boycott the black man came face to face with the full breadth and weight of the power of influence exercised by local and state governments intertwining and often stifling the protests.

Indeed, a principle byproduct of the American Civil Rights Movement has been the awakening of the black citizen to his awesome political potential. And just as the picket line and the lunch counter demonstrations and the boycotts were dramatic and effective weapons of protest for the civil rights movement, the polling place is the new phase in the new thrust of the black man's bid for equality of opportunity. "Power concedes nothing." How else can any man rise to power and hold sway over millions or tens of thousands except by smothering dissenting voices?

Freedom is an endless horizon, and there are many roads that lead to it. We must walk arm in arm with other men, and we must struggle toward goals which are commonly desired and sound. We must give and lend to the youth for stronger voice and encourage their individuality. We must look to the schools and constantly work for their improvement because that is where the future leadership of the country will be coming from to a large extent, particularly in the black communities.

The leaders of today in the black communities must be able to place the goal of freedom ahead of personal ambition. The truly dedicated leader follows what his conscience tells him is best for his people. For whatever else the black man is, he is American. Or whatever he is to become integrated, unintegrated, or disintegrated he will become it in America. Only a minority of black people have ever succumbed to the temptation to seek greener pastures of another country or another ideology. You know, so often nowadays we hear people say that we should go back to Africa, we should establish ourselves in Africa, or we should do a lot of other things.

Well if people want to go back to Africa or people want to go to Africa just like people want to go to Europe, that's their own personal business. And you do it voluntarily. I don't intend to go to Africa, I intend to stay here and fight because the blood, sweat, and tears of our forefathers are rooted in the soil of this country. And the reason that Wall Street is the great financial center that it is today is because of the blood sweat and tears of your forefathers who worked in the tobacco and the cotton fields.

And now because this nation is a mercantile nation and is enjoying the efforts and the labor of many of our forefathers, many of us want to escape and many of us want to run away. We didn't ask to be brought here in the first place. We came here shackled in chains at our ankles and our wrists and we were a cheap supply of labor and we worked.

We did many, many things. And now that the problem is becoming a little bit too hot. Everybody has all kinds of solutions for us. If you want to go to Africa willingly, you can go, just like other people in this country go to Europe, willingly. Nobody has to tell you or create something special for you. Our roots are here and our blood and sweat and our tears are here. And we're going to stay here. And we're going to fight.

For years, thousands of people from the European shores have been coming to this land. They came here hardly able to speak the English language but they came here and acquired the technological knowhow and they acquired the necessary skills that enabled them to become assimilated in the American culture and to move out and up into the American middle class. Hardly speaking English.

But we who have been born here, we who have been citizens by birth have not been able to become fully assimilated in the American culture because of an unmistakable and almost insurmountable barrier that just will not disappear because color doesn't disappear. And so, it behooves us to stay here and to fight. We have made this land, even though we have not been given the recognition, and nobody has to create any little nation or any little group and send us scuttling off. We want to go, we go. Freedom of choice.

The black man's total commitment to America indicate that the prospect ahead does seem bright. It is true that we are angry about our present plight for we measure this country not by her achievements but by her potential. "Black power." Oh how that phrase upsets so many people. Let me give you my definition of "Black power." Black power is no different from any other kind of power in this country.

Just as I told you a few moments ago, the people from European countries came here and found their way in the American scheme of things after they were able to get a certain kind of economic and financial security, the next thing that they became interested in was to achieve power to control their own destinies. And so for example in New York City you had at one time the Germans of ascendancy then you had the Italians then you had the Jewish people and the Irish. Every other group moving out to get power to control their destinies.

But nobody had to label that as "white power" because it was understood and assumed that it would always be white power. Now that we are beginning to do what they have been telling us to do for a long time, take ourselves up by our bootstraps and begin to consolidate our efforts and move out like every other group has moved out in America. Everybody is so hysterical and panic stricken because of the adjective that precedes the word power: "black." You know it would have been hoped in this country that we would never have to use the word "black" before the word "power" because America has been built on series of immigrants coming into this land rising up and moving out in terms of achieving power to control their lives.

But you see, they made one mistake. They thought that because we had been relegated for such a long time to a subservient position and that we had accepted rather docilely the position of second class citizenship that we would never rise up that we would never speak out. And so when we began to say to the world in our own way that we too know and

understand what other groups have been doing for a long time in this country. Consolidating and using our power and our efforts to move up and we want the world to know that it is "black power" because we have learned what other groups have been learning and doing for a long time in this country and people just have to get used to that word "black power"

It is indeed a reality that is gaining in emotional intensity if not always rational clarity. The harnessing and the solidification of Afro-American power however, is constantly being dissipated with factionalism. Internal struggle for power by one group over another. This behavior is no different from that of the whites. But we as a people cannot afford the luxury of fighting among ourselves if we are going to make real progress.

And Black people will gain only as much as they can through their ability to organize independent bases of economic and political power. Through boycotts, electoral activity, rent strikes, etcetera. Black power is concerned with organizing the rage of black people. Organizing the rage. And is putting new hard questions and demands to white America. We will build a new sense of community among our people. We will foster a bond between those who have made it and those on the bottom.

As Charles Hamilton says "Alienation will be overcome, and trust will be restored." And let us remember, that a great people are not affected by each puff of wind that blows ill. We must fight constantly for belief in ourselves and above all we must hearken back to the days of darkness when Frederick Douglass the great abolitionist, even in those times, echoed the famous phrase that has come realistically to haunt the black people today in America as they fight to enter the political, economic, and social mainstream of these United States, the land of their birth. And that phrase is "power concedes nothing"

Let me say to you, my brothers and sisters, that until we can organize to create black unity with an economic base. Until we can develop a plan for action to achieve the goals to make us totally independent and not have to look to the man in order to live, we are not liberated. We must become doers and producers in the system in order to be able to control our own destinies. We have the potential, but we must consolidate all of our strength for eventual liberation.

And the black man's responsibility today is to establish his own values and his own goals. In doing so he will be affecting the larger American society of which he is a part. The black man and the black woman cannot, however, act alone. They must act within a community or family, job, and neighborhood. Let us not kid ourselves into thinking that the white man is suddenly going to make the choice readily available. The new day will come with honest black pride, and unified black action and education, politics and economics. Why it has taken us so long to discover this simple approach is one of the mysteries of the

twentieth century. The Jews, the Poles, and the Slovaks discovered this phenomenon years ago. Compassion and understanding may moralize the system periodically, but it will never make it honest, just, and decent for us.

Only the application of economic and political power can achieve that goal. "Black is beautiful." You hear that phrase a great deal. Black is beautiful in what you do to contribute to the building of a strong black community throughout this country. The time now is to counteract the poison that has inflicted ignorance and hatred in the American social and political body. In seeking your identity you can explore your African heritage not simply by adopting the outward manifestations of African dress and appearance, but by going beyond the roots of that superficial type of thing that many of us might be doing to learn about contemporary Africa and it's people.

I talk with so many people who affect these manifestations and they don't know anything about Africa. Learn about contemporary Africa and it's people. And to appreciate that you and they have tremendous historical and cultural links that there is much that we can offer to each other's growth. Nineteen sixty- eight has clearly and painfully demonstrated the degree of stress and alienation that afflicts all of our institutions. Our young people have questioned the validity of traditional university education. They and many of their elders have fought against the tragic depletion of human and material resources in a complex Asian conflict that seems only to attract simple answers. The fabric of our incomplete nationhood has been torn down. The seam of black/white confrontation in this country.

We need a liberated and developing black community in America that once it has fully discovered it's inherent worth and power, turns to the even greater task of protecting and enlarging upon it's triumphs by further enriching an American culture that already has drawn so much from the black life stream. We need black businessmen who can rise beyond the local tax and spend and make dollars as well as cents for a black community that plays a full part in all levels of government. And there can be no understanding of the recent rioting of northern black ghettos or any realistic analysis of it's impact upon the civil right's movement in the nation, without the realization that black citizens have just pressing and long neglected grievances.

We do not erupt simply for exercise. We do not curse imaginary obstacles and procedures. Our resentments are not the product of a momentary flare-up, but of years of postponement, denial, insult, and abuse. The conscience of political democracy cries out for an end to false democracy. It has just been inevitable that black Americans are tired of being governed by laws they had no part in making. And by officials in who's choice they have no voice. It is idiotic to labor under the old the white supremacist supposition: that a white man knows what's good for the black man.

The non-white American is saying, "We no longer want tokens which will only take us on a subway ride. We want some bread, some meat, and a slice, not a sliver pie, the same way any other ethnic group receives under this system." In humanitarian terms, the war on poverty must be fought wherever it is found. Part of the battle must be fought with the establishment of the hundred dollars per week minimum for all Americans so that subsidation by welfare authorities is drastically reduced. And a man is paid a decent living wage in today's automated society. In today's most affluent society, if you please. The goal must be \$2.50 per hour. A national minimum for all Americans. This reduces poverty.

More crassly put, we will be able to get more people off welfare and relief roles, and on to tax roles. we can get them out of the alleys of society and into the mainstream of productive society and productive employment where they can support themselves and their dependents with dignity and pride. Where they can contribute to the growth and strength of the nation's economy.