



“The Iron of Courage: President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf”

Honorary Degree Dinner

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President

Indiana University

Indiana Memorial Union

Federal Room

Friday, May 2, 2008

7:00 p.m.

1. TOAST [BEFORE DINNER]

I am delighted to welcome you all to this evening of celebration in honor of our distinguished guest President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. We will have more formal remarks a little later in the evening.

Now would you please join me in raising your glasses to the long and productive partnership that Indiana University has enjoyed with our friends and colleagues in Liberia.

Tonight we extend that strong friendship as we recognize the strong leadership and character of a tireless crusader for freedom and equality: to President Sirleaf.

Please enjoy your meal.

2. WELCOME AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Again, thank you all for coming this evening. We are pleased that several particularly distinguished guests could join us this evening.

I am pleased to welcome Robert Sirleaf, President Sirleaf's son; Liberian Ambassador Charles A. Minor and his wife Comfort; and our commencement speaker Will Shortz.

3. LIBERIA AND INDIANA UNIVERSITY: A LASTING PARTNERSHIP

In the 1930s, ethnomusicologist George Herzog, who eventually joined the IU faculty, traveled to the Grebo region on Liberia's coast. There he made cylinder recordings of music and drum language. Today, those cylinders are housed in IU's highly regarded Archives of Traditional Music, founded by Dr. Herzog. They have provided vital data for researchers and students alike over the course of many years.

Those cylinders represent far more than data, however. They link researchers at Indiana University to the rich culture and heritage of Liberia.

This link can also be found in the work of J. Gus Liebenow, a pioneer in his studies of Liberia and founder of IU's African Studies Program. This link can be found in IU faculty member Dr. Amos Sawyer, who served as interim president of Liberia from 1990 to 1994. This link can be found in our institutional partnerships to help rebuild the country's legal education system, guide constitutional reform, and assist with other reform programs. This link can be found in IU's extensive archive of Liberian materials, the largest such collection outside of Liberia.

4. HONORING PRESIDENT ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF

Tonight we renew and strengthen our partnership with Liberia as we honor President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who will be receiving an honorary doctorate at tomorrow's commencement.

To say that President Sirleaf has accomplished great things is a vast understatement. She is a Harvard-educated economist, who has worked for the World Bank. She was the first woman to lead the United Nations Development Projects for Africa. And she is the first woman elected president of an African nation.

In short, she is an inspiration.

4.1 THE IRON OF COURAGE

Shortly after she was inaugurated in January 2006, President Sirleaf addressed the U.S. Congress.

She said, "I was not born with the expectation of a University education from Harvard or being a World Bank officer or an Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations."¹ She claims that nobody would have imagined her as the country's future president when she was a young girl growing up in Liberia.

Later, when she attended university in the United States, she waited tables to support her studies. We might guess that nobody in those restaurants imagined their waitress would be the future president of Liberia either.

Upon her return to Liberia, she became the country's first female Minister of Finance. Her political activism has brought her imprisonment and exile, but neither has deterred her from speaking out in the interest of equality, justice and governmental reform.

¹ Address delivered to a joint session of U.S. Congress. Washington D.C. 15 Mar. 2006.
<<http://www.uniboa.org/ellenspeech06.html>>

The challenges President Sirleaf has faced have been unimaginable, earning her the title “Iron Lady.” Indeed our guest of honor has been a woman of iron courage on so many levels. In presenting President Sirleaf with the Medal of Freedom in 2007, President Bush praised her actions in the face of a violent coup that plunged Liberia into civil war. She never wavered, he said. “Ellen Johnson Sirleaf stood up for the rights of her fellow citizens. . . . even though the consequences were house arrest, foreign exile, death threats and imprisonment.”²

Political leaders who bring about profound change must also be forged in iron so that their courage can be an inspiration to their people. This is the courage President Sirleaf shares with the people of Liberia. In her address to Congress, she explained, “Our people’s courage and patience are formidable, but their expectations are high.”

President Sirleaf is meeting those high expectations as she undertakes the arduous work of rebuilding her country.

In presenting President Sirleaf with an honorary degree, we recognize her tremendous contributions to justice, equality, and human rights. We also recognize the people of Liberia, their culture and heritage, and their courage and strength. It gives me great pleasure, and is a true honor, to introduce Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

² Department of State Daily Bulletin, November 6, 2007.

<<http://geneva.usmission.gov/DailyBulletin/2007/November/1106db.pdf>>