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Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration Leadership Breakfast

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President

Indiana University

Alumni Hall

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8:30 a.m.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much, Vice President Wimbush.

I am very pleased to be here this morning as we celebrate the life and enduring legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—whose universal vision of justice helped to awaken the social conscience of this great nation to its moral obligations.

The impact of Dr. King's life and work, of course, also reached around the entire world.

Though I have been an American citizen now for many years, I am an immigrant who was born and raised in Australia, like the father of our keynote speaker today, Ms. Soledad O'Brien. There, during my youth, university students were inspired by Dr. King and the American Civil Rights Movement to protest segregation and discrimination against Indigenous Australians, and then the apartheid in South Africa.

For those young Australian students, education was central to the struggle for social justice, and it remains so today for people around the globe.

My father actually emigrated to Australia from Scotland after serving in the British Army in World War II. He did not finish high school, and so I am actually a first-generation

college graduate, as, perhaps, are some of you who are here this morning. Hence, I know first-hand the enormous importance and impact of a university education, and I can honestly say that such an education has been essential to my own career.

2. TOWARD A GLOBAL BROTHERHOOD

In today's global society, an information and technological revolution has erased borders between nations and transformed our very understanding of distance and time. As President Obama said in his State of the Union address last week, this extraordinary change "can broaden opportunity, or widen inequality. And whether we like it or not," he said, "the pace of this change will only accelerate."¹ Thus, it is particularly appropriate to remember the words spoken by Dr. King more than fifty years ago at a commencement ceremony at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.

"Through our scientific genius," Dr. King said, "we have made of this world a neighborhood; now through our moral and spiritual development we must make of it a brotherhood." In Dr. King's memorable words: "we must all learn to live together as brothers, or we will all perish together as fools."²

More than half a century later, we have made enormous progress toward the brotherhood that Dr. King imagined, but many challenges remain.

Candidates for our nation's highest office engage in divisive anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric. A fierce debate rages across the nation today about biased policing in the wake of multiple incidents of inappropriate and excessive use of force and the multiple tragic shootings of unarmed African American men. Racial incidents occur with

¹ President Barack Obama, 2016 State of the Union Address, delivered January 12, 2016, Web. Accessed January 13, 2016, URL: <https://medium.com/@WhiteHouse/president-obama-s-2016-state-of-the-union-address-7c06300f9726#.cm34i3i6u>.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "The American Dream," Commencement address delivered at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania on June 6, 1961, reprinted in James Melvin Washington, (ed.) *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (HarperCollins, 1991) 209.

alarming regularity on many university campuses around the country. And, as IU alumnus Tavis Smiley and a number of IU faculty members document in the new book, *The Covenant with Black America: Ten Years Later*, black Americans are increasingly challenged politically, economically, and socially.

Clearly, there is still much work to be done.

If we are to build a community on the basis of diversity and make progress toward the brotherhood Dr. King so nobly envisioned—then all of us at Indiana University must bend our efforts—every day, and not just in the wake of a particular incident—to assure that our university community regards tolerance, diversity, and the free expression of ideas as among its cardinal virtues.

3. THE DIVERSE UNIVERSITY

This day when we honor the life and legacy of one of our great civil rights leaders is a fitting occasion to underscore and reaffirm Indiana University's unwavering commitment to diversity and free expression.

At Indiana University, we are committed to building a community in which the diversity of that community and of ideas is valued, and in which all members of the community are committed to the highest standards of ethical conduct and integrity.

As part of that commitment, we recruit students and faculty from diverse cultural backgrounds. We strive to ensure that cultural diversity is well represented in the curriculum. And we seek to ensure that members of our community who come from diverse backgrounds interact with one another in educationally productive ways.

As studies consistently show—and as we know from experience—diversity on university campuses leads to a broader collection of thoughts, ideas, and opinions that are held by

the student body, and this in turn increases the probability of exposing a student, irrespective of his or her race and opinion, to a wider range of perspectives on a particular issue.³ All of this contributes to an intellectual environment that is more conducive to experimentation and creative thought—qualities that are essential to the quality of higher education.

As educators, we must always insist that our students—and we ourselves—seek to understand, weigh, and assess the ideas, assertions, and arguments that come from other perspectives, other traditions, other disciplines, and other beliefs.

We must insist that there is no room at Indiana University for discrimination or harassment based on anyone’s actual or perceived race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or national origin.

In sum, we must demand a tolerant Indiana University, but we must aspire to an engaged Indiana University.

As we approach Indiana University’s Bicentennial in 2020, we are committed to further developing Indiana University as a diverse, engaged, multicultural academic community that will serve as a model for higher education, the state of Indiana, and society at large.

Many of you who are here today—as well as your fellow students and colleagues across the state—have accepted this enormous challenge and you dedicate yourselves with passion to making it a reality.

Thank you most sincerely for your commitment to this essential work and for all that you do to enhance our common future.

³ Jeffrey F. Milem, Mitchell J. Chang, and Anthony Lising Antonio, “Making Diversity Work on Campus: A Research-Based Perspective, (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2005), 7.

4. INTRODUCING SOLEDAD O'BRIEN

Now, it is my pleasure to introduce our distinguished keynote speaker—a woman who, throughout her storied career, has been committed to the same ideals about which I have just spoken.

Soledad O'Brien is an award winning journalist, documentarian, news anchor, producer and philanthropist.

She was the originator of CNN's *Black in America* and *Latino in America*—two acclaimed documentary series that examined issues facing the African American and Latino communities.

In June 2013 she launched Starfish Media Group, a multiplatform media production and distribution company, dedicated to uncovering and producing empowering stories that take a challenging look at the often divisive issues of race, class, wealth, poverty and opportunity, through personal stories. Starfish Media Group continues to produce *Black in America* and *Latino in America* and other programming for CNN.

Also, in June 2013, Ms. O'Brien joined HBO's *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* as a correspondent. In 2010, she wrote a critically-acclaimed memoir *The Next Big Story: My Journey through the Land of Possibilities*, which chronicles her biggest reporting moments and how her upbringing and background have influenced these experiences. Ms. O'Brien came to CNN from NBC News where she anchored the network's *Weekend Today*.

Together, Soledad and her husband, Brad Raymond, started Starfish Foundation, a non-profit organization that helps bridge the gap of opportunities for young minority women from low-income families to attend college with financial assistance, mentoring and holistic support so they can earn a degree and be on a path to success and hopefully in return one day they too will support other young women like them in their

communities. Soledad is a graduate of Harvard University and currently lives with her husband Brad and their four children in Manhattan.

Please join me in welcoming our distinguished keynote speaker, one of our country's most eminent journalists, Soledad O'Brien.