**Keynote Address**

**By**

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**On the Occasion marking the 171st Independence Day Celebration (July 26)**

**Of**

**The Republic of Liberia**

**By**

**The Liberian Community, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA**

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Mr. President and Officials of LAOWC

Distinguished Guests

Ladies & Gentlemen!

May I first thank you for finding me worthy – amongst fellow compatriots – of addressing this very important occasion as ***keynote speaker***, mindful that there are other eminently-qualified compatriots, perhaps even more than I.

With your chosen theme in mind, **“Forward Ever; Backward Never”** and appreciating the fact that the Liberian Association of Worcester County desires to ensure that Liberians as a whole advance under the **“banner of unity’** espoused by our forebears, I thought to speak to you on the topic: “**Fostering unity amid myriad national challenges**”.

Brothers and sisters, distinguished guests and well-wishers, I need not remind ourselves that we have yet to attain those lofty goals our founding fathers set out to achieve when the Liberian nation was established 171 years ago: goals of a flourishing republic where “liberty with justice” flows like a fountain to which we can converge and drink; a nation in which commerce, trade and industry would boom to promote prosperity. Regrettably, these expectations seem further away, more than ever before! And of course, as a people, we are also divided, given that the overarching ingredients of unity seem elusive. It is worth noting, however, that divisions along political lines are normal for a healthy and inclusive democracy in pursuit of national development goals; to the contrary, the same ought not to apply in terms of tribal settings. Moreover, people are no longer seen and appreciated because of the ‘contents of their characters’ and the critical skill-sets one possesses; but rather, on artificial labels that keep pushing us further apart. The question therefore becomes, ‘how can we foster unity amid the myriads of national challenges we face as a people today? Put differently, why are we so divided or have continued to fail to define a national purpose around which to rally? In other words, “what wrongs are we pursuing that keep us divided as a people?

Now to the crucial point: I can say with certainty that recognition of the *importance of unity to national development* has been legislated for many decades – Notably, **The May 14 National Unification Day** as enacted and observed by the late President Tubman has continued to be observed by successive administrations since then. Liberians from different walks of life have acknowledged the importance of unity to development and progress in every community or team effort. Notwithstanding, we just seem to be drifting further apart each and every passing year. The question then is why?

There are many factors responsible (external and internal), including poor national leadership (i.e. lack of visionary leadership), mismanagement of national resources for selfish personal gains; corruption; nepotism, sectionalism, tribalism, misplaced national priority; dubious enterprises and practices; poor and weak educational system (i.e. poor human capital and manpower) amongst the internal factors; while for the external, we have the perpetual reliance on and tying of Liberia’s economy to the supply of raw materials to industrial economies; external meddling in our national politics, etc. The list is endless; equally so, discussing each of these items could take months or even years. For our purposes today, I will limit myself to what in my view is the most important factor – our weak educational system which is the result of the poor quality of human capital in our country today. It has been recognized that a high educational standard is arguably key to success of any team, group or community efforts.

This does not mean high quality human capital leads to unity automatically. However, it makes national dialogue easily understandable and helps decision-makers and people to discuss issues constructively, as opposed to indulging in personal attacks and dwelling on trivialities. It encourages those who disagree to agree without manifesting intolerance and taking things personal if his/her ideas were not adopted as the group’s policy.

If we invest in our educational system – a system in which parents, teachers schools and government agencies work together for the common good, it shows that we are united *in purpose* such that discipline is not compromised; honesty and dedication are not negotiable; hard work is not an option and merit is celebrated! These developments will form the basis for coming together of the people with belief in those values that a sound education impacts on the lives of people who undergo them. Why should I harbor hatred in my heart against my compatriots if I know that after my studies (be they in vocational, technical or university education), jobs will be awarded on merits and not because of my tribe, region or connections? Why will I not work to move my country forward, if I know my country education system, besides being merit-base, imbibes vital skills such as critical-thinking before reaching any decision? Talking about critical-thinking, for example, a critical-thinker knows without justice there cannot be peace. We went through so many national tragedies, including a 14-year civil war as a result of which some families to this day are still grieving; while others are affected by what may be termed as mental laziness. Some of us believe that we can have peace, reconciliation and of course national unity for forward-march without any thought of addressing the injustices done. On the contrary, with a critical mindset developed in our schools, future generation will try to approach issues with analytical minds without washing problems away and thinking they will just vanish. They will always be asking how can I make this situation better?

That brings me to my closing statement and how I think we can make use of our educational system to serve as a tool for national unity and eventual national progress and development. First, we need to acknowledge that the most important asset in any family, organization, community or country is the people (i.e., human capital). The quality of the human capital determines the quality of work output to reach the organizational goals. The quality of the human capital is itself a function of the level of investment channeled into developing it. In Liberia therefore, we need to invest in our schools, including revising the curriculum where civic education (i.e. teaching the young ones their responsibility to their country will be a core subject). Critical thinking and analytical thinking should also be a core subject. Our education system should establish a National Youths Service Scheme as is in Nigeria where university graduates are required to serve the country as teachers for a year in counties/village schools that they don’t hail from. It helps people to appreciate the values of other people and see the diversity of others not as unwholesome or unwelcoming. We should build unity schools/multilaterals that bring together students from different tribes and backgrounds to learn together while forging good bonds as they go through schools. Parents, in their homes should teach their children the benefits of good morals and the values for individual and community growth. What stories of the war, for example, do you tell your children? That your people were blameless and persecuted unjustly or that we all bear the responsibility of the trouble we find ourselves one way or the other?

For you in the Diaspora, how can you foster national unity back home? There are many things you can do. I would suggest a few for consideration – You can:

* Volunteer your expertise during your leave breaks from work to come home and teach at schools, vocational institutions and universities;
* Identify projects, particularly libraries and science laboratory projects while soliciting books and equipment here in the Diaspora to equip them;
* Be your brothers’ and sisters’ keepers here in the Diaspora. Just a phone call to find out how they are doing. Inform them of opportunities you know about to help them apply. Of course, come together to form cooperatives (agriculture – ‘Ku System’) and private companies to become employers of your brothers and the communities you live in. Create a data base of people of Liberian Descent.

The challenges we face are basically down to us as individuals. Therefore, if we work hard to improve ourselves as individuals, and move out with good hearts to help our brothers and sisters, in the face of their challenges and disappointments, trust me, Liberia will not only be united, but will be an envy to other nations. With our small population, our best bet to national prosperity and development is investing in the knowledge-based industry that rests on the quality of the human capital of the country. With this, we shall forever move forward, and never look backward.

Thank you and God bless us all and save Liberia!

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