

## Words as Weapons

### *Why did our HBCUs get off track?*

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The complete history of debating would fill many volumes, but a few salient facts should be mentioned. The origins of debate are lost in the remote reaches of history, but we know that people were debating in Africa at least 4,000 years ago. For example, Egyptian princes debated agricultural policy at the pharaoh's court (2080 B.C.). Although debate exists all over the world, it thrives in the context of democratic Western civilization. Academic debate began at least 2,400 years ago when the scholar Protagoras of Abdera (481-411 B.C.), known as the father of debate, conducted debates among his students in Athens. Debate flourished in the academies of the ancient world and medieval universities, where rhetoric was installed as one of the seven liberal arts. What may have been the first intercollegiate debate in the English-speaking world took place in the early 1400s at Cambridge University between students from Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>1</sup>

Debating has held a special place in American history. Debating flourished in the colonial colleges; disputations were a required part of the curriculum, and debates were often a featured part of commencement ceremonies. Almost all the leaders of the American Revolution and the early national period were able debaters who had studied argumentation in the colonial colleges or in the community debating "societies," "lyceums," and "bees" that flourished throughout the country, most notably "the Spy Club" at Harvard in 1722.<sup>2</sup>

Secret debating societies flourished among both enslaved and free Africans in America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Debating societies were viewed as the training grounds for the leaders and foot soldiers struggling for freedom. Their weapons were words, not guns, and believed that reason, critical thinking and public speaking skills was the ammunition needed for victory.

Graduating just ten years after Oberlin opened its bachelor's program to women, Lucy Stone (1818-1893) was one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's three great women suffragists, along with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. While at Oberlin, Stone helped form a secret debating society for women (at the time, women were forbidden from public speaking) and taught at a school for fugitive slaves. The Young Ladies Association, the first women's debating society, began at Oberlin in 1835 due to student interest in debating important issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Austin J. Freeley and David L. Steinberg, "Critical Thinking for Reasoned Decision Making," *Argumentation and Debate* 10<sup>th</sup> ed., (2000), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Charles DeLancey and Halford Ryan, "Intercollegiate Audience Debating: Quo Vadis," *Argumentation and Advocacy*, vol. 27 (1990), p. 49.

A story written in the Washington Post from diary notes of Mrs. Anna Maria Thornton, “one of the capital’s finest ladies” spoke of her many encounters with an 18-year old slave in her house named Arthur Bowen in 1835. Mrs. Thornton recalled how Arthur “grew fond of drinking ‘ardent spirits’ while befriending free Negroes in a debating society who talked with him about slavery, the Constitution and his rights as a human being. In the debating society, organized by the Rev. John F. Cook, an energetic free Negro who ran a church and school on 14<sup>th</sup> and H Streets in Washington, DC, Arthur had learned that whatever liberty he had could vanish at a white man’s whim.

During Reconstruction, many free Negroes became involved in debate and community affairs. Reverend Cornelius Saunders Lucas, born a slave in 1845 and after emancipation went on to a distinguished career as a minister, businessman and politician in Fredericksburg, VA, was an officer of the Shiloh Young Men’s Association and Debating Society in 1872 and was one of a slate of black men nominated for city council in 1876.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar, born to former slaves in 1872 in Dayton, Ohio became the first African American to gain national eminence as a poet, was the only black child at Dayton Central High School and was a member of their debating society.

The 1860 Census counted 4.4 million Black people in the United States, most of who lived in the Southern states and were held as slaves. Prior to the end of the Civil War, teaching slaves to read or write was prohibited by law (or social custom) in many areas of the South. Indeed, the Portuguese even banned the export of paper to Africa. “*The pen could be mightier than the cutlass but who in their senses wanted Africans who could write?*”<sup>3</sup> This philosophy was formalized with Jim Crow laws regarding education. Still, there were three Black colleges founded before the Civil War: the Institute for Colored Youth (now known as Cheney University) was founded in Pennsylvania in 1837; Lincoln College in Pennsylvania, 1854, and Wilberforce College in Ohio in 1856.

During the period immediately following the Civil War, there was a dramatic increase in the number of educational institutions geared towards Blacks, funded primarily through groups like the American Missionary Association, the Freedman’s Bureau, and southern state governments, especially during the Reconstruction period. Between 1865 and 1890, over two hundred private black institutions were founded in the South. Most public Black colleges and universities trace their history to the second Morrill Act, passed in 1890 and in the decade that followed, 16 historically black universities and colleges (HBCUs) opened their doors. The Morrill Act allowed for the creation of a two-tiered system of land grant universities, with southern and border states creating HBCUs principally to gain access to federal funds to develop white land grant colleges. These HBCUs were largely limited to vocational training; well known agricultural, mechanical, and technical institutions such as North Carolina A&T and Florida A&M were founded during this period.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> History of Slavery, pg. 325.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Fryer, Jr., Harvard Univ., and Michael Greenstone, MIT, “*The Causes and Consequences of Attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities*” April, 2007.

The 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* firmly set the two-tiered system of higher education and as a result, HBCUs began to become institutions that primarily trained teachers to teach in segregated public schools. The rapid expansion of black high schools in southern urban areas set in motion a supply-demand chain in which the availability of teaching positions, supported by state treasuries, drew more black students into HBCUs to qualify themselves for teaching positions. There became interdependence between the public school system and HBCUs.<sup>5</sup>

Intercollegiate debates were relatively rare. Debates between HBCUs and Traditionally White Colleges (TWIs) were completely non-existent. Normally a college would schedule only a few intercollegiate debates during an academic year, and large audiences would assemble to watch the few students who were privileged to participate in these unusual events.

Howard University, established in 1867 and considered one of the elite HBCUs, dedicated its Biology Building to Ernest Everett Just, a prominent marine biologist and teacher who taught English and Biology and later served as the head of the Howard University Department of Zoology. Just attended Kimball Union Academy in New Hampshire and was the president of the debating society in 1903.

In 1906, Mary Church Terrell (a writer and activist who was one of the first African American women known to have earned a college and master's degree (Oberlin 1884/88) who taught at a black secondary school in the District of Columbia and was appointed to the DC Board of Education between 1895-1906 as the first black woman in the United States to hold such a position) reported about the strenuous efforts being made to run Jim Crow streetcars in Washington DC. In 1906 Terrell wrote "the Columbian Debating Society of the George Washington University hosted a debate that year with the topic "Resolved, that a Jim Crow law should be adopted and enforced in the District of Columbia" and the decision was rendered in favor of the affirmative. Later that year, Representative Heflin of Alabama introduced a bill in Congress providing for Jim Crow street cars in the District of Columbia."

During this period, the secret debating societies gave way to formal ones. In 1908, the earliest recorded debate between HBCUs, Howard University debated Shaw University on the question of ship subsidies. Shaw won that competition. For the next 30 years, the Kappa Sigma Debating Society at Howard University hosted or traveled to competitions against Shaw, Lincoln, Wilberforce, Morehouse, Fisk, Atlanta, and Virginia Union universities at least twice each year on subjects such as woman's suffrage, the income tax, limitation on property inheritance, a graduated income tax, the government ownership of telegraph, Japanese exclusion, compulsory arbitration, compulsory military training, the government ownership of railroads and breaking from the allegiance to the Republican party.<sup>6</sup> The greatest victory at the time was claimed to have taken place

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<sup>5</sup> Roland Fryer, Jr., Harvard Univ., and Michael Greenstone, MIT, "*The Causes and Consequences of Attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities*" April, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Howard University archives. Yearbook, 1925.

against Atlanta University in 1916 on the question, “Resolved, that the United States should subsidize all ships engaged in South American trade as soon as practicable.” One writer put it, “George Hall and William Temple, amid a hostile audience in Atlanta, were able to snatch a unanimous decision.”

In 1912, oratorical contests began and by 1918, additional forms of debating societies emerged with the purpose of training its members in Parliamentary procedures. Among the new programs included the Mock Congress of the United States which was conducted in the fashion of the US Congress.<sup>7</sup>

From the 1920s to the 1940s, contract debating prevailed. A college debating team would send out contracts to other teams specifying details such as which team would argue which side of the proposition, how judges would be selected, and where the visiting team would be housed, and offering to reciprocate as host on some future occasion. When a sufficient number of signed contracts had been returned, teams would depart by car, bus, or train for a few days or a week or two of debating.

The first known debating society organized for African American women was the Forum Debating Society of Howard University in 1919. At that time, it was the only organization in the university devoted to the intellectual development of women alone, and which the women were allowed entire control. The Forum, although it was primarily devoted to debating, also aimed to instill in its members an appreciation for good literature and the importance of keeping up on all current events.<sup>8</sup> However, because of the nature of contract debating and gender inequities, the Forum members did not compete against other colleges but maintained a robust presence on Howard’s campus for years.

In 1922, the Kappa Sigma Debating Society, now organized for over a generation whose purpose was to “foster debating and to develop ready and useful speakers” had realized that it had developed the vast majority of the male leaders of the student body and that “the men with the keenest minds, plenty of initiative, advocates, speakers, presidents of the many classes, presidents of the student council, have generally acquired much of their ability through the medium of this organization. In fact, many of our prominent lawyers, developing young leaders, and active alumni were found in the weekly meetings of this society.”<sup>9</sup> That year, through the initiative of Mr. J. Garland Wood, the society proposed a national intercollegiate honorary debating fraternity. The Delta Sigma Chi was organized the same year on Howard’s campus, with representatives from Lincoln and Virginia Union present. Mr. Wood was elected first president of this fraternity whose function was to organize varsity debaters, present them with keys and foster public speaking, argumentation, and oratory among the Negro college students to a greater extent. By 1925, 45 keys had been awarded to varsity debaters of the three schools and the fraternity endeavored to increase the number of chapters. Wilberforce and Morehouse favorably considered making applications for membership. The society also

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<sup>7</sup> Howard University archives. Yearbook of 1919.

<sup>8</sup> Howard University archives. Yearbooks, 1920-23

<sup>9</sup> Howard University archives. Yearbook 1925.

planned to publish a Negro Intercollegiate Debating Manual in 1926, containing debates of Howard, Atlanta, Virginia Union and Lincoln. In 1925 for the first time, the society promoted a debate participated in by a female student, noting that the Freshman class sent “one of the fair sex to help uphold its colors on the forensic battlefield.”<sup>10</sup>

Across the country on the west coast in 1923, Ralph Johnson Bunche was a brilliant student and a top debater in the college circuit, as president of the debating society at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) graduating *summa cum laude* in 1927 and valedictorian of his class. Dr. Ralph Bunche became a pre-eminent American political scientist, civil rights activist and diplomat who received the 1950 Nobel Peace Prize for his late 1940s mediation in Palestine. He is credited with being the original architect for Middle East peace following the creation of the State of Israel, and was the first person of color to be so honored in the history of the Nobel Prize.

Down south in Atlanta in 1924, Morehouse College president John Hope recruited Benjamin Elijah Mays to coach the debate Team. Benjamin Mays became a renown African-American minister, educator, scholar, social activist who took over as president of Morehouse College and became a significant mentor to one of his former students, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. Mays was among the most articulate and outspoken critics of segregation before the rise of the modern civil rights movement in the United States. His star debaters were Howard Thurman (*Ebony magazine* called Thurman one of the 50 most important figures in African American history, and *Life* rated him among the 12 best preachers in the nation), James Madison Nabrit, Jr. (Howard law professor on team with Thurgood Marshall that successfully argued *Brown v. Board of Education*), and Brailsford Brazeal.

Founded May 25, 1925 by Bruno E. Jacob in Ripon, Wisconsin, the National Forensics League (NFL) hosted the first national high school speech tournament in 1930 with 49 schools from 17 states.<sup>11</sup> However, evidence of any black student participation during the first NFL championships is unavailable.

Debates had become the forum for great societal discourse. On March 17, 1929, a debate assembled by the Chicago Forum drew “4300 white and colored people and hundreds more were turned away” to hear two of the nation’s most eloquent speakers debate the topic “*Shall the Negro be Encouraged to Seek Cultural Equality?*” For the affirmative, W. E. Burghardt Dubois, Harvard Ph.D., Director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Editor of *The Crisis* since 1910 and Author of *The Soul of Black Folk*, *The Negro*, *Dark Water*, *The Gift of Black Folk*, *The Dark Princess*, etc.; and for the Negative, Lothrop Stoddard, Harvard, Ph.D., Author of *The Rising Tide of Color*, *The Revolt Against Civilization*, *Reforging America*, and of many magazine articles on race problems “from the Nordic viewpoint.”<sup>12</sup> In his opening remarks, Mr. Fred Atkins Moore, Director of the Chicago Forum, stated that the debate was just one in a series of “regular Sunday afternoon meetings of the Chicago Forum for

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia “National Forensics League”.

<sup>12</sup> The Forum Council, copyright 1929

the discussion of vital questions of public interest.” “That means that the Forum is neither white nor black, neither radical nor conservative; that it takes no stand on any questions whatsoever; but that it does believe in free open discussion of every question that affects vitally our common life.”

Prior to introducing the speakers, Moore stated “I think everyone here will agree with me that it is the kind of question that is seldom brought out into the open to be discussed in the light of day, and to be discussed from at least two important sides as it will be presented here today.” After setting the time constraints upon each speaker, Moore introduced both debaters by saying “The two speakers have been amply made known to you – Dr. W. E. B. Dubois, unquestionably one of the ablest speakers for his race not only in America but in the whole wide world – and Dr. Lothrop Stoddard, whose books and writings and speaking have made his views known to many hundreds of thousands of people both in this country and abroad. We have these speakers who will talk frankly and we will listen with equal openness of mind, respecting the sincerity of the speakers even though we disagree with one or the other.” The two men went on to have one of the first and arguably most important interracial debates in American history on the question of social, cultural and legal equality. Then, following the final rebuttal speeches, Mr. Moore expressed his appreciation to the speakers and everyone in the auditorium “for confirming our faith that we could have such a debate on this, and on this big scale, and that every single person present would take it as a good intellectual, spiritual, sporting proposition and that nobody has got excited...”<sup>13</sup>

In 1932, a young Bayard Rustin had just enrolled into Wilberforce College after graduating from West Chester high school in Pennsylvania as the first African American student to win the W. Webster Meredith Speaking Contest for Boys and remained a debater for the rest of his life. Rustin would later become a key civil rights activist (largely behind the scenes in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and earlier) and principal organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom at which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his “I Have A Dream” speech. He counseled Martin Luther King, Jr. on the techniques of nonviolent resistance, was openly gay and advocated on behalf of gay and lesbian causes in the latter part of his career.

Inspired by the 1935 story of Wiley College’s winning debating team, the movie “The Great Debaters” chronicles the true story of a young debater named James Farmer, Jr., later to become one of “the Big Four” civil rights leaders who in 1942 founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and engineered the “Freedom Rides”<sup>14</sup> throughout the South in 1961. Set against the backdrop of the Jim Crow South, the movie chronicles the journey of the Wiley College debate team - coached by the brilliant and passionate professor Melvin Beaunorus Tolson. Tolson was an American Modernist poet, educator,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pg. 26

<sup>14</sup> The Freedom Rides occurred began in 1961 and were based on the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, led by civil rights activist Bayard Rustin. Like the Freedom Rides, the Journey of Reconciliation was intended to test an earlier Supreme Court ruling that banned racial discrimination in interstate travel. Rustin and a few of the other riders, chiefly members of CORE, were arrested and sentenced to serve on a chain gang in North Carolina for violating local Jim Crow laws regarding segregated seating on public transportation.

columnist and politician whose work concentrated on the experience of African Americans and includes several poetic histories. He was a contemporary of the Harlem Renaissance and although he was not a participant in it, his work reflects its influences.<sup>15</sup> Liberia declared Melvin B. Tolson as its poet laureate in 1947. It was Tolson's recognition that the power of knowledge is the greatest advantage of all, which brought these students from underdogs to victors against Harvard in a time when more than the odds were against them.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, the 1935 Wiley College debate team actually beat the University of Southern California, the reigning and self-proclaimed "national champions" that year. The formal process for selecting the national champion was created 12 years later in 1947. However, during Wiley College's winning season in 1935 they hosted a debate against the Howard University team of Carlton B. Goodlett and Leroy Weeks, "gold-key" holders on the Kappa Sigma Debating Society. In that debate, the Wiley College team lost. There is some dispute regarding the actual first formal debate competition held between white and black universities. Howard and Northwestern universities' claims the first such competition occurred between them in 1937.

Tournament debating was introduced in the 1920s, and by 1936 some educators were concerned about its increasing popularity.<sup>17</sup> At a typical tournament, dozens of colleges would send individual teams of two students to compete against each other in a series of randomly matched preliminary rounds, typically 8, and the top 16 teams based on the win/loss record of preliminary rounds, advance to a quarter final round. The 8 winners advance and the 8 losers go home But tournament debating did not become predominant until the late 1940s.

Many of these same young debaters began shaping American history in profound ways. At the funeral ceremony for James Farmer, Martin Luther King III, the son of the late civil rights immortal who worked shoulder to shoulder with Farmer, stated "Many think that Martin Luther King Jr. was the originator of the use of Gandhian techniques in this country," King said. "But it was James Farmer in 1942, homing in on the Gandhian-inspired tactic of nonviolent civil disobedience and direct action." "At that time my father was only 13 years old and a student at Booker T. Washington High School in Atlanta," King said. "But he was no doubt influenced by the sit-ins and direct-action protests led by James Farmer that began in the early 40's."<sup>18</sup>

National high school speech and debate tournaments were not held during World War II; however due to encouragement by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the national

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<sup>15</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>16</sup> The official press package for "The Great Debaters" states: "Although the Wiley team did defeat the national champions, we couldn't find documentary evidence that they actually debated Harvard University. Nonetheless, we felt for our story Harvard best embodied Wiley's incredible achievement and conveyed the real Wiley debate team's true sense of accomplishment. In that era, there was much at stake when a black college debated any white school, particularly one with the stature of Harvard" noted Robert Eisele, writer of the screenplay.

<sup>17</sup> Alfred Westfall, "Can We Have Too Much of a Good Thing?" *The Forensic of Pi Kappa Delta*, Oct. 1936, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> The Free Lance-Star, 1/7/2005.

Student Congress continued to be held. By and large the rules that governed that tournament are still in effect today providing one of the longest running national competitions for high school students. Approximately 1.2 million high school students have been members of the NFL since its establishment in 1925.<sup>19</sup>

In the post-World War II era, tournament debating became the predominant mode of debating. In 1947 the U.S. Military Academy began the National Debate Tournament (NDT) at West Point. Tournament debating proliferated and teams soon could choose among many tournaments at nearby or distant colleges on almost any weekend between October and April. Swing tournaments evolved in which two colleges relatively close to each other would schedule back-to-back tournaments during the winter break so that, instead of one or two debates a day, teams could hold two tournaments in a week. A tournament would offer as many as twelve or more debate rounds in a single tournament.

In February 1948, mostly through his sister's efforts, Malcolm Little was transferred to an experimental prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts, a facility that had a much larger library. Born in 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska, whose father was an outspoken Baptist lay speaker and supporter of Marcus Garvey, as well as a member of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, three of Earl Little's brothers died violently at the hands of white men, and one of his uncles had been lynched. Now Malcolm X, while reflecting upon his time in prison stated, "I've told how debating was a weekly event there, at the Norfolk prison colony. My reading had my mind like steam under pressure. Some way, I had to start telling the white man about himself to his face. I decided I could do this by putting my name down to debate ... Once my feet got wet, I was gone on debating. Whichever side of the selected subject was assigned to me, I'd track down and study everything I could find on it. I'd put myself in my opponents' place, and decide how I'd try to win if I had the other side; I'd figure a way to knock down all those points."<sup>20</sup> Malcolm X later went on to debate in at least 20 formal competitions against students and professionals at Yale, Howard, Oxford and Cambridge universities, (to name a few) over the next two decades. He and Bayard Rustin were debate partners in a public debate held on Howard's campus.

In 1952 Barbara Jordan joined the debate team at Texas Southern University, the historically black educational institution in Houston. Jordan, who would go on to become a U.S. congresswoman, was part of the team that battled the debate team from Harvard University to a tie in a Houston meet, a remarkable achievement for that time and place. Over the years the parliamentary style debate team at Texas Southern University has remained one bright spot at what has been an often troubled educational institution. Professor Thomas Freeman, who started the team in 1949, coached the team for over 50 years until the age of 86. Over the past decades, the team has won at least 100 individual and team trophies. It has participated in debates all over the nation and in Prague, Buenos Aires, London, and South Africa.

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<sup>19</sup> Nflonline.org.

<sup>20</sup> Autobiography of Malcolm X, 1964.

In 1953, Donald Franchot McHenry debated while attending Illinois State University. He went on to coach the debate team at Southern Illinois University in 1957 while earning a Master's degree and thereafter enrolled at Howard University in 1960 to receive a PhD.<sup>21</sup> In 1960, McHenry met Patricia Roberts Harris, associate dean of students and lecturer at Howard's law school. Harris, who served as United States Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, the last United States Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and the first United States Secretary of Health and Human Services in the administration of President Jimmy Carter, was the first African American woman to serve as a United States Ambassador, representing the U.S. in Luxembourg under President Lyndon B. Johnson, and the first to enter the line of succession to the Presidency.<sup>22</sup> Harris ensured the continued support for the Kappa Sigma Debating Society. From 1960 through 1962, Donald McHenry coached the Kappa Sigma Debating Society.<sup>23</sup> McHenry went on to become the United States Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations under President Jimmy Carter.

In 1967 the American Forensic Association assumed responsibility for the National Debate Tournament, which has been hosted by a different college each year since then. It is now the dominant force in intercollegiate debating, and hundreds of universities gear their programs towards winning a place at the NDT or emulate the practices of teams that were successful at the NDT. Unfortunately, of the approximately 103 HBCUs now in existence, few if any other than Howard have maintained a program geared towards winning at the NDT since its inception.

In 1974, the 65-year old Kappa Sigma Debate Society became the Martin Luther King, Jr. Debate Society. Albert R. Wynn, a star debater and graduate from the University of Pittsburg and Georgetown Law School, became Howard's coach. For the next eight years, Wynn developed a NDT caliber team leading the university to major wins at regional and national (white) tournaments. In 1975, Bruce Douglas, Luther Brown and Alan Warrick placed respectively 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> at the Clark College Debate Tournament in Atlanta, firmly establishing Howard as the number one black college debate team.<sup>24</sup> The pinnacle was in 1979 when the team of John W. Davis, II and Sterling Henry, Jr. won 1<sup>st</sup> Place at the Gator Invitational Debate Championships, a major regional qualifier tournament for the NDT championships at which, for the first time in university history, a Howard debater won. Davis was named 10<sup>th</sup> Best Speaker in the nation at the 1979 Kent State National Championships. Coach Wynn led his team to achieve the most wins in university history and boosted the university ranking to among the top teams in the nation. Wynn went on to become elected first to the Maryland House of Delegates, then the Maryland Senate and is now in his seventh-term as a US Congressman from Maryland. The top debaters on Wynn's squad included Robert A. Walters (now a pre-eminent criminal defense attorney in New York), Lita T. Rosario (now a entertainment attorney representing some of the biggest names in rap music), Sterling Henry (who became a member of President Bill Clinton's Cabinet serving as the Director of the White

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<sup>21</sup> Personal interviews.

<sup>22</sup> Wikipedia.

<sup>23</sup> Personal interviews.

<sup>24</sup> Right On magazine, March 17, 1975.

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House Initiative on Black Colleges) and John W. Davis, II (who went on to a distinguished career as a trial lawyer before being named Director of the Homicide Division for the Justice Department in the US Virgin Islands and the first General Counsel for FVI Federal Savings Bank, and later returned to Howard in 2003 as adjunct professor of communications law and head coach of the debate team).

During the 70's and 80's, alternatives to the NDT style debating became in vogue. In 1971 the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) was established as an alternative to NDT debating that had developed a reputation for rapid speaking and an overly heavy reliance on "evidence." Other debate organizations sponsoring team debates coexist with CEDA and NDT.

In the 80's, for the second time in history, an effort was undertaken to create a formal debate league comprised of the majority of HBCUs. Under Albert Wynn's leadership and with the student energy of members of the Martin Luther King Jr. Debate Society, Savannah State, Morehouse, Texas Southern, Winston-Salem State, Southern and Howard agreed to create a league and became the predominate HBCUs competing in what was termed the "National Black College Debate Tournament." Unfortunately, support for debate programs waned and within three years, the tournament had become yet another footnote in history.

In 1984 the American Debate Association was established among primarily Eastern seaboard and mid-Atlantic universities to foster the growth of "reasonable" rule-based policy debate. The National Educational Debate Association (NEDA) promotes debate with a focus on communication style and educational practice. The National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA) and the American Parliamentary Debate Association (APDA) sponsor competitive intercollegiate debate using a modified parliamentary format. Lincoln-Douglas, or one-on-one, debate is organized through the National Forensic Association.

In the early 1990s John Davis became coach of Howard's debate team for a short but very successful four year span prior to his departure to become the Director of Major Crimes for the Justice Department in the US Virgin Islands. Then after his return to the States, in 2004, Davis founded the National High School Forensics Academy and Tournament at Howard University, the first national debate "boot camp" for urban public school students. For the next two years, he raised over \$250,000 from private donors to provide scholarships to over 100 of the nations top African American and Latino high school debaters (from 15 States) to attend the Academy as a way to train for the upcoming season of competition and become the best in the nation. The winners of the summer tournament received a \$5,000 scholarship to attend Howard and debate for the team. It was Davis' vision to use NHSFAT as a recruitment vehicle to attract the top students to compete for him on Howard's team, by exposing Howard and the powerful influence of Washington DC to inner-city high school students. NSFAT received the support of Senators Barak Obama, John Kerry, John McCain, and John Corzine. Members of Congress who supported the program included Mr. Menendez, Albert Wynn and Eleanor Holmes Norton also supported the program. Coaches from among the most

prestigious universities in the US lectured to the students and members of the intelligence, legal and diplomatic community also assisted.

The following year in 2005, after an 11-year hiatus, the Howard debate team was reborn under Davis' supervision. That year's team, "handpicked from the best students in the classes" he taught as professor of communications law, competed at the Novice National Championships held at Georgetown University where two freshmen placed among the top 25 in the country, beating Cornell University, New York University and the US Military Academy along the way. Restarting the team was a personal conviction for Davis as the university had no longer financially supported the debate program. And despite the lack of funding for the 2006 program, Davis raised the money necessary to take the team to compete at the Western States Novice National Championships in Sacramento, CA where the team advanced to the Final Round and lost to a team from the University of California Polytechnic Institute. The strategy had been successful – the two students that were on the team that ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> in the nation had attended the NHSFAT camp and chose Howard at their college.

However, following the 2006 season Howard no longer funded a debating team. Indeed, the unfortunate reality is that the last HBCU to have competed in a sanctioned NDT tournament with results posted was Howard University in 2004 according to Debateresults.com. Virtually none of the 103 HBCUs have chosen to prepare teams to compete on this level since.

On a positive trend, urban high school debate teams are defying the odds – whether they field national championships or simply transform a group of once-apatetic students into avid readers and skilled communicators. And they've been growing exponentially. In just 10 years, 19 urban debate leagues have been established, bringing approximately 350 high schools in 19 cities into a competitive realm long dominated by their better-funded suburban and private counterparts. The momentum started with private funding for a debate league in New York's public schools from George Soros's Open Society Institute. With a spotlight on academic accountability, other districts have joined with private partners to replicate the model because of its track record of improving achievement levels and equipping at-risk students with lifelong skills.

Many urban debate coaches still labor away with few resources or accolades – sometimes taking on the extra roles of chauffeur, fundraiser, and even parent figure to students whose home lives are coming apart at the seams. But in September 2004 they were validated when a fellow coach received a "genius grant" from the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago. Tommy Lindsey won \$500,000 for his work teaching forensics – which includes debate, public speaking and dramatic interpretations of poetry and prose. In 14 years, he's expanded the forensics program at Logan High in Union City, California, from 15 students to well over 200, with about half a dozen competing nationally each year.<sup>25</sup> At present, The National Forensic League (NFL) and the National Association of Urban Debate Leagues (NAUDL) represent over three thousand high school debate programs.

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<sup>25</sup> Christian Science Monitor, October 19, 2004.

Of all institutions, HBCUs should well know just who its students will be competing against. Notable former debaters include U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Richard Nixon, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson; Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia; Senator Lamar Alexander, Senator Phil Graham, Senator Richard Lugar, Senator George McGovern, Senator Edmund Muskie, Senator Jack Reed, Senator David Boren, Senator Frank Church, Senator Dick Clark, Senator Howard Heflin, Admiral William Crowe-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Alan Dershowitz-Harvard law professor, Lawrence Tribe-Legal Scholar, Robert Rubin-Secretary of Treasury, Harry Connick Jr.-Singer/Songwriter, Lee Iacocca-CEO Chrysler, Samuel B. Gould-President, Antioch College, Governor Ann Richards, Governor Zell Miller, Arianna Huffington-TV Commentator, Jane Pauley-NBC Network Anchor, Jerry M. Anderson-President, Ball State University, Erwin Canham-editor, Christian Science Monitor, Susan Rook-CNN Anchor, Nadine Stroessen-President, ACLU, Lawrence H. Summers-President, Harvard University, Jackson Browne-Singer/Songwriter, Governor Bob Graham, David B. Henry-President, University of Illinois, Congressman Claude Pepper, to name a few.

With such a strong tradition of debate, juxtaposed against such a powerful list of former debaters, how did HBCUs get off track by failing to continue to support such a long tradition of excellence? Clearly, it cannot be argued that it is a resource issue – these schools continue to fund football, basketball and other sporting events. Instead, it is an issue of priorities and many hope that the interest generated from the release of the movie “The Great Debaters” will revive debate’s wonderful tradition in the African American experience.

As the release of *The Great Debaters* coincidentally ushers in the 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of debate between HBCUs, the great tradition has nearly died – because of misplaced priorities, not a lack of resources. When comparing athletics to debate, a more striking contrast could not be imagined. For example, in 2005 (the last year debate was funded as a program) there were 427 male and female undergraduates at Howard competing on varsity athletic teams versus 42 on debating teams. To support the 427 varsity athletes, Howard spent over \$15 million in related student financial aid, coaching salaries, recruitment and operating expenses for the teams, totaling over \$35,000 per varsity athlete each year. By contrast, the budget for the debate team was \$60,000, to cover coaching salaries, travel, lodging and fees, or just \$1,428 per debater.

The argument that athletics get priority because it generates revenue is built on a faulty premise. Nearly all HBCUs operate athletics at a deficit. In 2005, Howard, generated only \$9 million in sports revenue against the \$15 million in expenses, not to mention the “practice” of charging a wide range of athletics related expenses to the general operating budget, whether for debt, grounds, security, legal work, administrative staff, benefits, insurance, or other expenses large and small.

The current lack of debate programs at HBCUs has created an academic vacuum of staggering proportions. The Urban Debate Network, formed in 1997 by the Open Society

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Institute, currently has 311 urban high schools and 51 urban middle schools in 18 of the nation's largest cities. More than 37,000 urban public school students have competed in tournaments. Urban Debate Leagues (UDLs) have proven to increase literacy scores by 25%, improve grade-point averages by 8 to 10%, achieve high school graduation rates of nearly 100%, and produce college matriculation rates of 71 to 91%. Since 1997 approximately \$11 million has been invested in UDLs by school districts, such as those in Baltimore, Detroit, St. Louis, Seattle, Newark, Kansas City, and Chicago. Private partners have also made significant multi-million dollar investments. Ironically, these "disadvantaged" students involved in the most academically rigorous of all student activities, can no longer look to HBCUs to continue their debating career.

Debate training equips youth for future success. Former debaters are disproportionately represented among leaders in the media, business, law and government. In a nation where 64% of the members of the 104th U.S. Congress (1996) were former debaters, maintaining this form of leadership training is critical to the African American community. So rather than view it as a movie, view *The Great Debaters* as a call to action to revive debate at HBCUs and reclaim this proud African American tradition.