

Address by H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia,
And Visitor of the William V.S. Tubman University
At the
Special Convocation for the Inauguration of Dr. Elizabeth Davis-Russell
As First President of the William V.S. Tubman University

Friends and Partners of Liberia;
Special Guests;
Fellow Liberians:

What a glorious day today!

We have just witnessed history in the making: A daughter of Harper, born and raised right here; who received her early schooling here; who went on to the United States, after a bit more schooling elsewhere in the country, received degrees galore, making the most of the educational opportunities offered to her; who reached the highest levels in her profession, as an academic, administrator, and practicing psychologist; and who, in 2007, answered the call to return home to contribute to the rebuilding of her country. Today, we witness her Inauguration as the First President of the William V.S. Tubman University, here in her hometown. What a journey!

What a distinct honor, therefore, it is for me to be a part of this history, not only as President of our Republic and as The Visitor of this University, and also woman to woman. For not only are you, Dr. Elizabeth Davis-Russell, the first President of Tubman University, you are also the first female to head this institution since it was established over 30 years ago as the William V.S. Tubman College of Technology, or TC, as it was called. You are a trailblazer in every sense of the word!

In the Oath you took before this distinguished gathering, you pledged to fulfill your Office, to faithfully execute your duties, and to endeavor at all times to maintain and uphold the privileges, rights, and dignity of the University. There's no doubt in my mind that you will do just that, because of the tremendous leadership skills you have demonstrated in your drive to get this institution to where it is today.

You may recall when, in 2007 in my office, I said to you, after your acceptance of the position, that we needed to do a work plan; it was a difficult task ahead. At that time TC reopened. And you said to me: I will open the University in September 2009. I said, not possible! The roads are in bad shape, so you can't get materials there to repair the buildings; the ocean is rough, and if you take a ship or a boat, you're likely to have some of your materials go down into the sea; the whole city is in a state of disrepair, we're just trying to fix it; there are no teachers and no teaching materials. Please, put it off a bit. And she said: Madam President, I will open the college in 2009, even if I have to open just one building. What initiative!

I congratulate you. This is your Special Day. You've earned it, you deserve it, you've made our country proud, and I salute you for your noble efforts.

I think it is significant that both you and Dr. Emmet Dennis, President of the sister University of Liberia, are sharing this podium today, and that he is an active participant in your installation. He, too, knows the drill. Less than a year ago, he was in a similar situation, and look what change has come to the University of Liberia.

In my Annual Message to the National Legislature, which got lost because of other things, so let me repeat it, I commended you both for leaving high-level and well-paid jobs at prestigious universities in the United States to come home and to render sacrificial service that will have a significant impact on the young people of this country as they prepare for their future. I thank you, on behalf of all Liberians, for your decision to make this sacrifice.

In this connection, let me acknowledge and thank the Past Presidents of Tubman College of Technology who are with us today. I don't know who they are. Would you please stand. Past Presidents, you produced, prior to the outbreak of the civil conflict that crippled and destroyed the educational fabric across the length and breadth of our country, over half of the technocrats of this nation.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

A key goal of this Government is to provide access to quality and relevant educational opportunities at all levels, in support of our social and economic goals. In our Poverty Reduction Strategy, which is guiding us toward rapid, inclusive and sustainable development, we underscored the need to improve the quality of tertiary education while implementing a phased expansion and decentralization of our higher education system. More specifically, we called for the establishment of at least one new institution of higher learning outside Monrovia, and we set September 2009 as a starting date.

On Monday, September 14, 2009, right on schedule, this University bolted through the door, fulfilling that aspect of our education agenda. That goal was achieved thanks to the determination and perseverance of you, Madam University President, and your faculty and staff. Thanks to your efforts, the University opened as you promised, thereby bringing this dream to fruition. In keeping with that objective, the Legislature enacted, and I signed into law on September 14, 2009, an Act creating the William V.S. Tubman University. Let me say a big thanks to the Maryland Legislative Caucus, many of whom are in this room, who through the budgetary process enabled us to put up the resources to get the University started. Another budget year is coming. We are so pleased today to be here to inaugurate this new President.

Last week, I had the privilege to address two prestigious universities here in our sub-region: the University of Agriculture at Abeokuta, Nigeria; and the University of Ghana-Legon. I saw, first-hand, what dedication and a strong commitment to education, and the achievements and accomplishments that can be made. The University of Agriculture boasted of 179 academic programs, with a focus on promoting agricultural education and services for agricultural development and attainment of food self-sufficiency – consistent with ECOWAS's policy to make agriculture and food security an achievable priority in our sub-region. The University of Ghana has grown in status and standing since its founding in 1948. Today, it has earned the enviable reputation as being one of the greatest citadels of intellectualism in West Africa.

Here in Harper, Maryland County, we envisage the day when Tubman University will serve as a regional magnet for our young people in the southeast and beyond, offering degrees in a host of disciplines so that students can be assured of getting the best education Liberia has to offer. Gone are the days when men and women, young boys and girls, from this part of the country had to leave home and travel to Monrovia or to Gbarnga to further their education. Gone are the days when they had to risk all that they had to be able to achieve a higher education. We know that others will follow Tubman University. We expect that, in a short period of time, the Technical College of the University at Sinje, the Community College in Ganta, the Community College in Buchanan, the Community College in Zwedru will follow, making sure that we do make higher education accessible to all of our people.

I have noted, Madam President, that you have started with 288 students: 83 percent of these students hail from southeast Liberia; 51 percent are from Maryland County; but only 24 percent are female. We have to work on this gender parity, to make sure that TU also has as many female students as male. I see so many young ones in the choir. Let me say to you, the opportunity is yours; go for it.

Dr. Elizabeth Davis-Russell dreamed. She awoke with a vision, and the impossible dream became possible. That's what leadership is all about.