

Ben S Bernanke: Recognizing leadership

Remarks by Mr Ben S Bernanke, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the US Federal Reserve System, at the Princeton Prize in Race Relations Awards Program, Washington DC, 22 May 2007.

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As a former member of the Princeton community, I am very pleased to see the university recognizing these young people – the two prize winners, John Gentile and Brianna Casey Lyons, as well as the eight certificate recipients – for demonstrating exemplary leadership in the area of race relations. Slavery and segregation cast long dark shadows on our nation's history and our society, but there have been flickers of light in the form of people of good will and courage who fought against those evils. Today, I can think of no higher calling than promoting harmony, understanding, and respect among people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The two prize winners, though young, have already contributed significantly. As you have heard, John energetically advocated improved race relations in his own school and helped to bring diversity concerns before a wider group of high schools in the District of Columbia metro area. Casey led a group of exurban teenagers in starting a 4-H Club at a more-urban, and racially mixed, elementary school.

If you are a baseball fan, as I am, you know that we recently observed the sixtieth anniversary of an important event in the history of race relations – Jackie Robinson's breaking of the color barrier in major league baseball. Robinson was a great baseball player, but – critically, for the mission he set out to accomplish – he was also a great leader, a person of courage and character. As a second lieutenant in the Army in 1944, he refused to obey an order to move to the back of a military bus in Texas. Lieutenant Robinson was court-martialed but then acquitted by a military jury, and he received an honorable discharge. It was Jackie Robinson's character as much as his daring style of play that commanded the respect of players and fans and paved the way for other black athletes to enter the major leagues. No one who watched Robinson perform under often-hostile conditions could long deny that he was the equal of any white player, not only as an athlete but as a human being. Other flickers of light appear in this story as well, including the decision of Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey to give Robinson a chance and the public support provided Robinson by a few of his white teammates.

In a way, Jackie Robinson was lucky, because he was rewarded for his skills and courage. He was named Rookie of the Year, played on six World Series teams, and was once named the National League's Most Valuable Player. Someone less fortunate in this respect was Josh Gibson, considered the greatest power hitter of the Negro Leagues. He played right here in Washington for the Homestead Grays in the 1930s and 1940s. Some people say he was the equal of Babe Ruth as a hitter. But he never got the chance to play in the major leagues. He died at the age of thirty-five, three months before Jackie Robinson first trotted onto Ebbets Field with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Both men played the game superbly, but whereas Jackie Robinson was honored and recognized in his lifetime for his achievements, both as a baseball player and a civil rights leader, recognition of Josh Gibson came only after his death. Gibson, along with other greats of the Negro Leagues, was finally admitted to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1972, a quarter century after he died and a decade after Robinson was admitted.

It is tragic that Gibson did not live to see the integration of major league baseball or to enjoy the honors that were due him. However, even though society's recognition of Gibson's achievements came too late for him to enjoy it, honoring him was still worthwhile. The belated recognition of Gibson illustrates a most important reason to honor achievement: We do it not so much for the person being honored but rather for ourselves. Please do not misunderstand me. I hope today is a joyous and proud day for today's prize winners and certificate recipients and their families. But I strongly suspect that when they set out on the path that earned them this recognition, they were not motivated at all by – and probably were not even aware of – the prospect of an award such as the Princeton Prize. They did what they did from inner motivation. So, if the prospect of recognition had little or nothing to do with their achievement, why go through the exercise? The reason they are being honored, and the reason we remember Jackie Robinson and Josh Gibson and countless other achievers in countless other endeavors, is because doing so provides inspiration for all of us. And, usually, the aspect of an achievement that is most worth recognizing is not the achievement itself but the spirit of energy, determination, and courage that made it possible. So, let me say to today's honorees: Thank you. Thank you not only for serving as a role model for your peers in high school but also for being exemplars for us all.

Now, because we are in the midst not only of baseball season but also of graduation season, I would like to touch briefly on the theme of education. The saddest aspect of Josh Gibson's story is that he had talent but was denied an opportunity. Then as now, the principal path to opportunity is through education. As an economist, I am persuaded that a strong educational system – one that promotes lifetime learning and skill development – is a critical factor in our nation's prosperity. The economic importance of education will only increase as technology advances and as the global economy becomes increasingly integrated and complex.

But education is important for non-economic reasons as well. By providing us with a broader view of the world, education helps each of us become the most complete person we can be. Many – I hope all – of the young people here today will continue their education, and I hope it leads them to work that brings financial success. But I also hope it cultivates their creativity and appreciation for other cultures and leads them to work they find personally satisfying and meaningful. I know it will help them continue to demonstrate the kind of leadership that they have already shown. Perhaps, as they acquire a deeper knowledge of places and times other than their own and a fuller understanding of people from backgrounds other than their own, it will also lead them to contribute positively at the national or international levels, as they already have done in their schools and local communities.

But this evening, I don't think we should dwell entirely on the future. I hope each of the honorees will take pride in what he or she has already achieved and will celebrate that achievement with family and friends. Congratulations to all of you.