

Dr. Benjamin Carson Speech at the National Prayer Breakfast

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Transcribed by Aldo Tavares

Thank you so much. Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, Mrs. Obama, distinguished guests, which includes everybody. Thank you so much for this wonderful honor to be at this stage again. I was here 16 years ago, and the fact that they invited me back means that I didn't offend too many people, so that was great.

I want to start by reading four texts which will put into context what I'm going to say: Proverbs 11:9 With his mouth the Godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escapes. Proverbs 11:12 A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue. Proverbs 11:25 A generous man will prosper. He who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. And 2nd Chronicles 7:14, If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land.

You know, I have an opportunity to speak in a lot of venues. This is my fourth speech this week. And I have an opportunity to talk to a lot of people, and I've been asking people what concerns you? What are you most concerned about in terms of the spirituality and the direction of our nation and our world? I've talked to very prominent democrats, very prominent republicans. And I was surprised by the uniformity of their answers. And those have informed my comments this morning. Now, it's not my intention to offend anyone. I have discovered, however, in recent years that it's very difficult to speak to a large group of people these days and not offend someone.

And people walk around with feelings on their shoulders waiting for you to say something, ahhh, did you hear that? They can't hear anything else you say. The pc police are out in force at all times. I remember once I was talking to a group about the difference between a human brain and a dog's grain, and a man got offended, He said: You can't talk about dogs like that. But, people just focus in on that, completely miss the point of what you're saying. And we've reached a point where people are afraid to actually talk about what they want to say because somebody might be offended. People are afraid to say Merry Christmas at Christmas time. Doesn't matter whether the person you're talking to is Jewish or, you know, whether they're any religion. That's a salutation, a greeting of goodwill. We've got to get over this sensitivity. You know, and it keeps people from saying what they really believe.

You know, I'm reminded of a very successful young businessman, and he loved to buy his mother these exotic gifts for mother's day. And he ran out of ideas, and then he ran across these birds. These birds were cool, you know? They cost \$5,000 a piece. They could dance, they could sing, they could talk. He was so excited, he bought two of them. Sent them to his mother, couldn't wait to call her up

on mother's day, mother, mother, what'd you think of those birds? And she said, they was good. He said, no, no, no! Mother, you didn't eat those birds? Those birds cost \$5,000 a piece! They could dance, they could sing, they could talk! And she said, well, they should have said something. And, you know, that's where we end up, too, if we don't speak up for what we believe. And, you know, what we need to do, what we need to do in this pc world is forget about unanimity of speech and unanimity of thought, and we need to concentrate on being respectful to those people with whom we disagree. And that's when I think we begin to make real progress. And one last thing about political correctness, which I think is a horrible thing, by the way. I'm very, very compassionate, and I'm not never out to offend anyone. But pc is dangerous. Because, you see, this country, one of the founding principles was freedom of thought and freedom of expression and it muffles people. It puts a muzzle on them. And at the same time, keeps people from discussing important issues while the fabric of this society is being changed. And we cannot fall for that trick. And what we need to do is start talking about things, talking about things that are important. Things that are important in the development of our nation.

One of those things was education. I'm very passionate about education because it's made such a big difference in my life. But here we are at a time in the world, the information age, the age of technology, and yet 30% of people who enter high school in this country do not graduate. 44% of people who start a four-year college program do not finish it in four years. What is that about? Think back to a darker time in this our history. Two hundred years ago when slavery was going on, it was illegal to educate a slave, particularly to teach them to read. Why do you think that was? Because when you educate a man, you liberate a man. And there I was as a youngster placing myself in the same situation that a horrible institution did because I wasn't taking advantage of the education. I was a horrible student. Most of my classmates thought I was the stupidest person in the world. They called me dummy. I was the butt of all the jokes. Now, admittedly, it was a bad environment. Single-parent home, you know, my mother and father had gotten divorced early on. My mother got married when she was 13. She was one of 24 children. Had a horrible life. Discovered that her husband was a bigamist, had another family. And she only had a third grade education. She had to take care of us. Dire poverty. I had a horrible temper, poor self-esteem. All the things that you think would preclude success. But I had something very important, I had a mother who believed in me, and I had a mother who would never allow herself to be a victim no matter what happened. Never made excuses, and she never accepted an excuse from us. And if we ever came up with an excuse, she always said do you have a brain? And if the answer was, yes, then she said then you could have thought your way out of it. It doesn't matter what John or Susan or Mary or anybody else did or said. And it was the most important thing she did for my brother and myself. Because if you don't accept excuses, pretty soon people stop giving them, and they start looking for solutions. And that is a critical issue when it comes to success.

Well, you know, we did live in dire poverty, and one of the things that I hated was poverty. You know, some people hate spiders, some people hate snakes, I hated poverty. I couldn't stand it. And but, you know, my mother couldn't stand the fact that we were doing poorly in school, and she prayed and asked God to give her wisdom, what could she do to get her young sons to understand the importance of developing their minds so they could control their own lives? And you know what? God gave her the wisdom. At least in her opinion. My brother and I didn't think it was that wise. Because it was to turn off the TV, let us watch only two or three TV programs during the week, with

all that spare time, read two books a piece from the Detroit Public Libraries and submit to her written book reports which she couldn't read, but we didn't know that. You know, she put check marks and highlights and stuff... But, you know, I just hated this. And my friends were out having a good time. Her friends would criticize her. They would say you can't make boys stay in the house reading books, they'll grow up, they'll hate you. And I would overhear them and say, you know, mother, they're right. But she didn't care. You know, and but after a while, I actually began to enjoy reading those books because we were very poor, but between the covers of those books I could go anywhere, I could be anybody, I could do anything. I began to read about people of great accomplishment, and as I read those stories, I began to see a connecting thread. I began to see that the person who has the most to do with you and what happens to you in life is you. You make decisions. You decide how much energy you want to put behind that decision. And I came to understand that I had control of my own destiny. And at that point I didn't hate poverty anymore, because I knew it was only temporary. I knew I could change that. It was incredibly liberating for me, made all the difference.

And to continue on that theme of education, in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville came to America to study this country. The Europeans were fascinated. How could a fledgling nation, barely 50 years old already be competing with them on virtually every level. This was impossible. De Tocqueville was going to sort it out and he looked at our government and he was duly impressed by the three branches of government, four now, because now, we have special interest groups, but it was only three back in those days. He said, wow, this is really something, and then he said, but let me look at their educational system and he was blown away. See, anybody who had finished the second grade was completely literate. He could find a mountain man on the outskirts of society who could read the newspaper and have a political discussion, could tell him how the government worked.

If you really want to be impressed, take a look at the chapter on education in my latest book, *America the Beautiful*, which I wrote with my wife, it came out last year, and in that education chapter you will see questions extracted from a sixth grade exit exam from the 1800's, a test you had to pass to get your sixth grade certificate. I doubt most college graduates today could pass that test. We have dumbed things down to that level and the reason that is so dangerous is because the people who founded this nation said that our system of government was designed for a well-informed and educated populace, and when they become less informed, they become vulnerable. Think about that. Our system of government and that is why the education is so vitally important.

Now some people say, ahhh, you're over blowing it, things aren't that bad, and you're a doctor, a neurosurgeon. Why are you concerned about these things? Got news for you. Five doctors signed the Declaration of Independence. Doctors were involved in the framing of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, a whole bunch of things. It's only been since in recent decades that we've extracted ourselves, which I think is a big mistake.

We need doctors, we need scientists, engineers. We need all those people involved in government, not just lawyers...I don't have anything against lawyers, but you know, here's the thing about lawyers... I'm sorry, but I got to be truthful... got to be truthful, what do lawyers learn in law school? To win, by hook or by crook. You gotta win, so you got all these democrat lawyers, and you got all these republican lawyers and their sides want to win. We need to get rid of that. What we need to start thinking about is how do we solve problems?

Now, before I get shot, let me finish here. You know, one of the reasons... And I don't like to bring up problems without coming up with solutions. My wife and I started the Carson Scholars Fund 16 years ago after we heard about a survey, an international survey looking at the ability of eight graders in 22 countries to solve math and science problems, and we came out number 21 out of 22. Barely beat out Number 22, very concerning. And we'd go in schools and we'd see all these trophies: All-State Basketball, All-State Wrestling, All-State this, that and the other. The Quarterback was the big man on campus. And what about the intellectual superstar? What did they get? A national honor society pin? A pat on the head, there, there little nerd? You know, nobody cared about them. And is it any wonder that sometimes the smart kids try to hide? They don't want anybody to know that they're smart? This is not helping us as a nation. So we started giving out scholarships to students from all backgrounds for superior academic performance and demonstration of humanitarian qualities. Unless you cared about other people, it didn't matter how smart you were. We've got plenty of people like that. We don't need those, we need smart people who care about other people. We would give them money. The money would go into a trust. They would get interest on it. When they went to college they'd get their money, but also the school gets a trophy, every bit as impressive as any sport's trophy, goes right out there with the others. They get a medal. They get to go to a banquet. We try to put them on the same kind of pedestal as we do the All-State athletes. Now, I have nothing against athletics or entertainment, please believe me. You know, I'm from Baltimore. The Ravens won. This is great, okay, but, but, what will maintain our position in the world? The ability to shoot a 25-foot jump shot or the ability to solve a quadratic equation? And we need to put the things into proper perspective.

And you know many teachers... You know, many, many teachers have told us that when we put a Carson Scholar in their classroom, the GPA of the whole classroom goes up over the next year. And it's been very gratifying. We started 16 years ago with 25 scholarships in Maryland, now we've given out more than 5,000 and we are in all 50 states, but we've also put in Reading Rooms. These are fascinating places that no little kid could possibly pass up. And they get points for the amount of time they spend in there reading, the number of books that they read. They can trade in the points for prizes. In the beginning they do it for the prizes, but it doesn't take long before their academic performance begins to improve. And we particularly target title one schools where the kids come from homes with no books and they go to schools with no libraries. Those are the ones who drop out. We need to truncate that process early on because we can't afford to waste any of those young people. You know, for every one of those people we keep from going down that path, that path of self-destruction and mediocrity, that's one less person you have to protect yourself and your family from. One less person you have to pay for in the penal or welfare system. One more taxpaying productive member of society who may invent a new energy source or come up with a cure for cancer. They are all important to us and we need every single one of them, it makes a difference. And when you go home tonight please read about it, Carson Scholars Fund, carson scholars.org.

But why is it so important that we educate our people? Because we don't want to go down the same pathway as so many pinnacle nations that have preceded us. I think particularly about ancient Rome. Very powerful. Nobody could even challenge them militarily, but what happened to them? They destroyed themselves from within. Moral decay, fiscal irresponsibility. They destroyed themselves. If you don't think that can happen to America, you get out your books and you start reading, but you know, we can fix it. Why can we fix it? Because we're smart. We have some of the most intellectually

gifted people leading our nation. All we need to do is remember what our real responsibilities are so that we can solve the problems. I think about these problems all the time, and you know, my role model was Jesus. He used parables to help people understand things. And one of our big problems right now, and like I said, I'm not politically correct, so I'm sorry, but you know, our deficit is a big problem. Think about it. And our national debt, \$16 and a half trillion dollars, you think that's not a lot of money? I'll tell you what! Count one number per second, which you can't even do, because once you get to a thousand it will take you longer than a second, but, one number per second. You know how long it would take you to count to 16 Trillion? 507,000 years, more than a half a million years to get there. We have to deal with this.

Here's the parable: a family falls on hard times. Dad loses his job or is demoted, gets part time work. Has five children. He comes to the five children, he says: we're going to have to reduce your allowance. Well, they're not happy about it but, he said, except for John and Susan. They're, they're special. They get to keep their allowance. In fact, we may get them more. How do you think that's going to go down? Not too well. Same thing happens. Enough said. What about our taxation system? So complex, there is no one who can possibly comply with every jot and tittle of our tax system. If I wanted to get you, or you, I could get you on a tax issue. That doesn't make any sense. What we need to do is come up with something that is simple. And when I pick up my Bible, you know what I see? I see the fairest individual in the Universe, God, and he's given us a system. It's called tithe. Now we don't necessarily have to do it 10% but it's principle. He didn't say, if your crops fail, don't give me any tithes. He didn't say, if you have a bumper crop, give me triple tithes. So there must be something inherently fair about proportionality. You make \$10 Billion dollars you put in a Billion. You make \$10 you put in \$1, of course, you gotta get rid of the loopholes, but, now, now some people say, they say: that's not fair because it doesn't hurt the guy who made \$10 Billion dollars as much as the guy who made \$10. Where does it say you have to hurt the guy. He's just put in a billion in the pot. You know, we don't need to hurt him. It's that kind of thinking, it's that kind of thinking that has resulted in 602 banks in the Cayman Islands. That money needs to be back here, building our infrastructure and creating jobs, and we're smart enough, we're smart enough to figure out how to do that.

We've already started down the path to solving one of the other big problems, health care. We need to have good health care for everybody. It's the most important thing that a person can have. Money means nothing, titles mean nothing when you don't have your health, but we've got to figure out efficient ways to do it. We spend a lot of money on health care, twice as much per capita as anybody in else in the world, and yet not very efficient. What can we do? Here's my solution. When a person is born, give him a birth certificate, an electronic medical record and a health savings account, to which money can be contributed, pre-tax from the time you are born, to the time you die. When you die, you can pass it on to your family members so that when you're 85 years old and you've got 6 diseases, you're not trying to spend up everything. You're happy to pass it on and nobody is talking about death panels. That's number one. And also, you know, for the people who are indigent, who don't have any money, we can make contributions to their HSA each month because we already have this huge pot of money instead of sending it to some bureaucracy, let's put it in their HSA's. Now they have some control over their own health care and what do you think they're going to do? They're going to learn very quickly how to be responsible. When Mr. Jones gets that diabetic foot ulcer, he's not going to the emergency room and blowing a big chunk of it. He's going to go to the

clinic. He learns that very quickly, gets the same treatment. In the emergency room they send him out. In the clinic they say, now let's get your diabetes under control so that you're not back here in three weeks with another problem. That's how we begin to solve these kinds of problems. It's much more complex than that, and I don't have time to go into it all, but we can do all these things because we are smart people.

And let me begin to close here by another parable: Sea Captain, and he's out on the sea near the area where the Titanic went down. And they look ahead and there's a bright light right there, another ship, he figures. And he tells his signaler: signal that ship, deviate 10 degrees to the South. Back comes the message: no you deviate 10 degrees to the North. Well, he's a little bit incensed, you know. He says, send a message: this is Captain Johnson, deviate 10 degrees to the North. Back comes the message: this is Ensign 4th Class Reilly, deviate 10 degrees to the South. Now he is really upset. He says send him a message: this is a Naval Destroyer. Back comes the message: this is a Lighthouse. Enough said.

Now, what about the symbol of our nation? The eagle, the bald eagle. It's an interesting story how we chose that, but a lot of people think we call it the bald eagle because it looks like it has a bald head. That's not the reason. It comes from the Old English word piebald, which means crowned with white. And we just shortened it to bald. Now, use that the next time you see somebody who thinks they know everything. You'll get'em on that one. But, why is that eagle able to fly, high, forward? Because it has two wings: a left wing and a right wing. Enough said.

And I wanna close with this story: two hundred years ago this nation was involved in a war, the war of 1812. The British, who are now our good friends, thought that we were young whippersnappers. It was time for us to become a colony again. They were winning that war and marching up the Eastern Seaboard, destroying city after city, destroying Washington D.C., burned down the White House. Next stop Baltimore. As they came into the Chesapeake Bay, there were armadas of ships, war ships as far as the eye could see. It was looking grim. Fort McHenry standing right there. General Armistead, who was in charge of Fort McHenry, had a large American flag commissioned to fly in front of the Fort. The Admiral in charge of the British Fleet was offended, said take that flag down. You have until dusk to take that Flag down. If you don't take it down, we will reduce you to ashes. There was a young amateur poet on board by the name of Francis Scott Key, sent by President Madison to try to obtain the release of an American physician who was being held captive. He overheard the British plans. They were not going to let him off the ship. He mourned. As dusk approached, he mourned for his fledgling young nation, and as the sun fell, the bombardment started. Bombs bursting in air. Missiles, so much debris. He strained, trying to see, was the flag still there? Couldn't see a thing. All night long it continued. At the crack of dawn he ran out to the banister. He looked straining his eyes all he could only see dust and debris. And then there was a clearing and he beheld the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen, the torn and tattered stars and stripes still waving. And many historians say that was the turning point in the war of 1812. We went on to win that war and to retain our freedom and if you'd gone onto the grounds of Fort McHenry that day, you would have seen it at the base of that flag, the bodies of soldiers who took turns. Propping up that flag, they would not let that flag go down because they believed in what that flag, that flag symbolized. And what did it symbolize? One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Thank you. God Bless.

