

1985

SHIRLEY ANITA CHISHOLM

Mr. President, it is my very great honor to present to you SHIRLEY ANITA CHISHOLM, statesperson and educator, as a candidate for an honorary degree. Receiving her bachelor's degree cum laude from Brooklyn College and her master's degree from Columbia University, Shirley Chisholm has consistently stood for that most highly cherished tradition in the liberal arts: that education and learning, no matter how extensive or profound, achieves its true worth only when it is placed in the service of humanity.

Beginning with her work in children's education and continuing through two terms in the New York State Assembly and seven terms in the United States Congress, she has been selflessly dedicated to the causes of those citizens of our nation and our world who have been rendered powerless by the forces of greed, ignorance, and bigotry. Often flaunting tradition and disregarding personal consequences, Shirley Chisholm has, for more than two decades, been an articulate and forceful advocate on behalf of poor, excluded, and oppressed peoples everywhere.

Her unwavering commitment to the principles of a true, full democracy for all Americans led her, in 1972, to become the first black woman to seek the nomination of a major political party for President of the United States. It was during that campaign that she spoke these words which are as true today as they were when she first delivered them in Kalamazoo's Bronson Park thirteen years ago, ". . . we Americans need the best collective abilities of all of our citizens. We Americans need to lift the burden of unfairness and discrimination from so many of our fellow countrymen, of both sexes, of all ages, and all races." With limited funds, a small organization, and virtually no established backing — in short, none of the advantages enjoyed by her opponents — she received more than 150 votes for President at the 1972 Democratic National Convention.

While, in the narrowest sense of the word, she was defeated in her historic quest, she nonetheless won a greater and more lasting victory by cracking that barrier which prevents far too many of our people, regardless of their talents, from fully participating in our national political life. As she would later say, "The door is not yet open. But it is ajar." If, in recent years, others have been able to inch that door somewhat wider, it is clearly only because Shirley Chisholm had the moral vision, courage, and strength of character to give it that first, so very difficult, push. Certainly there can be no greater testament to the values of a liberal education, its dedication to justice and truth, than the life and career of this spirited and inspiring woman.

Therefore, on behalf of the faculty of Kalamazoo College, I recommend that upon SHIRLEY ANITA CHISHOLM be conferred the honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters.