

**Michael J. Murphy, Chargé d’Affaires, a.i.**  
**Remarks for Film Festival Opening**  
**Commemorating Black History Month**  
**Monday, February 25, 2013**

**As prepared for delivery**

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Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to join you here at the University of Botswana Library for this very special evening as we commemorate Black History Month. Tonight, we come together to celebrate the lives and stories of African Americans whose history is an essential thread of the American fabric, for it traces our ongoing journey to improve the nation we have built together. Each February, Americans pause to remember the lives of Americans who arrived on our shores not as free men, but as slaves. These men, women and children, and several generations of their children, endured the profound injustice of servitude and racial oppression.

Tonight we especially honor those African Americans who, through their abundant talents and unbending will, transcended this bitter legacy and challenged my country to honor the ideals expressed in its seminal founding document, the Declaration of Independence, that “all men are created equal.” Nearly 100 years ago, a black American historian, Carter G. Woodson, saw that the contributions African Americans had made to American history and the African American experience in the United States had never been chronicled. Woodson founded the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and initiated "Negro History Week," during the second week of February to mark the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. The week was later extended to a month and renamed Black History Month.

This year's theme, "At the Crossroads of Freedom and Equality: The Emancipation Proclamation and the March on Washington" calls on us to consider where we started and how far we have progressed on the road to universal freedom and equality in the United States.

In 1861, as the United States stood at the brink of Civil War, people of African descent, both enslaved and free persons, waited with a watchful eye. Frederick Douglass, the most prominent black leader at the time understood that a civil war would end slavery. Like Douglas, the four million people of African descent in the United States, recognized this

elemental truth long before many of their white counterparts did. As a consequence, both free blacks quickly rallied around the Union flag and the cause of freedom. At the same time, as Union armies marched south, slaves deserted plantations by the thousands.

"I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think, and feel," President Abraham Lincoln once said. Nonetheless, Lincoln struggled with how best to end slavery, proposing schemes for compensated emancipation and colonization before issuing the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.

Lincoln's proclamation freed only those slaves in states still in rebellion against the Union. In these locations, Lincoln said, he could exercise his authority under the Constitution as Commander in Chief to abolish slavery.

To ensure the abolition of slavery in all of the United States, Lincoln pushed for passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, a political process that is the subject of Steven Spielberg's critically-acclaimed film "Lincoln."

This year, as we celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Emancipation Proclamation, it is right that we acknowledge the significance of that step, the progress we have made since, and road we have yet to travel. Carter Woodson, Frederick Douglass, and indeed Abraham Lincoln would look today at that Union that was saved in that awful conflict and say that we have come a long way, yet we have far to go. As President Barack Obama said, "Racial prejudice is no longer the steepest barrier to opportunity for most African Americans, yet substantial obstacles remain in the remnants of past discrimination. Structural inequalities – from disparities in education and health care to the vicious cycle of poverty – still pose enormous hurdles for black communities across America."

While today's challenges are very different from those overcome by black Americans 150 years ago or even 50 years ago – the same dedication to justice, equality, tolerance, and openness to cooperation and collaboration is no less important today. Justice ... equality ... tolerance ... openness to cooperation. These are foundation stones from which better nations emerge. I am proud that my country has grown in these areas – and I know it will continue to grow.

When I look around Botswana, at today's leaders, and more importantly, at tomorrow's leaders, I see a similar commitment. It is not an overstatement to say that on this campus, the Botswana that will exist in 30 years is being determined today. This country's future will not be determined by stones that emerge from ground, but by the knowledge and imagination that emerge from the minds of today's youth.

Tonight, we kick off a celebration of the history and achievements of Americans of African descent. I thank you for joining me in this celebration, and I challenge you, as Botswana, set your course for the future – and let it be based on justice, equality, tolerance, and cooperation. My own country has come far on that course – no doubt we have far to go – but the distance that America has travelled is demonstrated no more clearly than by President Barack Obama, the man himself and the office he holds. For that reason, we begin this year's film festival with his story.

Deputy Dean Mwikisa, again, I am proud to join you and the University in participating in this festival as we celebrate together Black History Month.

Thank you.