

1971 Commencement Speaker at William and Mary

Summary of Relevant Articles in *The Flat Hat*, 10/2/1970-5/14/1971
(With Citations and Excerpts)

Early in the 1970-71 academic year, the senior class sponsored a referendum to determine class preferences for their commencement speaker. The list of potential speakers they proposed was John Lindsay, Margaret Meade, Ramsey Clark, Paul Ehrlich, Kingman Brewster, Harold Hughes, Charles Evers, and Mark Hatfield, with space for a write-in vote.

I was not able to find the result of the vote in subsequent *Flat Hat* issues. However, the first three names on the students' final list were evidently Mayor John V. Lindsay of New York, Mayor Charles Evers of Fayette, Miss., and Senator William Fulbright, in that order.

In early Spring, 1971, after John Lindsay declined the invitation, members of the administration suggested that inviting Charles Evers, the second name on the list, "might not be appropriate." President of the university, Davis Y. Paschall, announced his intention to invite a "graduation speaker of his choice," by-passing Mr. Evers, the students' second choice. Students expressed surprise and outrage, and a *Flat Hat* editorial proclaimed "The President has no right to disregard the expressed will of the senior class in choosing a speaker, even if he does have the technical power to do so."

Subsequently, President Paschall indicated to the students that "he was continuing the search for a graduation speaker since the four speakers invited so far had declined." He refused to address the continuing senior class pressure to invite Mr. Evers.

Several Letters to the Editor followed before the president announced on April 28 that Rep. Thomas N. Downing of Newport News, Virginia's 1st district, would deliver the commencement address.

The students immediately countered by inviting Mr. Evers to Williamsburg and asking him to address the students on commencement day at a special assembly, independently of the commencement activities. He accepted the invitation but expressed his wish not to be involved in interrupting the commencement itself.

In response to an earlier letter Mr. Evers had received from a student informing him of these events at the college (both letters reprinted in Letters to the Editor), he said,

"... I am truly sorry that you and the other members of the Senior Class at William and Mary have been balked at your attempts to secure the commencement speaker you wished to have. ... However, if you and all the others of the Class of '71 who feel as you do can take this experience as an object lesson of what racism has done in our country, and can attempt in your future lives to help get rid of discrimination in all its forms, this temporary setback can be turned into permanent victory. ..."

The administration eventually agreed to Mr. Evers speaking on campus on commencement day. In response to the students' objections "to stick[ing] us out at the Matoaka amphitheater," President Paschall "personally arranged [a] compromise" allowing the event to take place in Blow Gym, at 10:30 in the morning.

The William and Mary Class of 1971 further distinguished itself by designating its departing class gift to the college, \$800 (more than had been raised by any previous class), for the Martin Luther King Scholarship Fund out of "concern for one of the College's most pressing and most neglected problems."

Note. The last issue of *The Flat Hat* before commencement appears to have been May 14. The next issue in the archive is September 4 with no mention made of the commencement. Instead, the big stories were the appointment of Thomas A. Graves, Jr. President of the University, Dr. Paschall having resigned, and the appointment of a replacement for Vice President for Academic Affairs W. Melville Jones.

Flat Hat Citations and Excerpts

10/2/1970

“Controversy Surrounds List Of Possible Grad Speakers” (p. 3)

<https://dspace.swem.wm.edu/bitstream/handle/10288/18245/FH19701002.pdf?sequence=1>

“Senior class officers will sponsor a referendum this week to determine class preferences for commencement speakers. The referendum, prepared by Craig Windham, senior class secretary, will be held in conjunction with Student Association elections. The list will include John Lindsay, Margaret Meade, Ramsey Clark, Paul Ehrlich, Kingman Brewster, Sen. Harold Hughes, Charles Evers and Mark Hatfield. There will also be a space for a write-in vote. . .”

2/5/1971

Editorial Page (p. 2)

<https://dspace.swem.wm.edu/bitstream/handle/10288/4002/fh19710205.pdf?sequence=1>

“Seniors”

“The Class of 1971 has set a remarkable standard for future class gifts. Not only is the seniors’ gift the first ever to exceed \$800 it is also the first permanent ‘In perpetuity’ bequest to the College besides walls. . . .

“Donating money to the King Scholarship Fund shows concern for one of the College’s most pressing and most neglected problems. At least one-half student will not have to worry about where the money is coming from, either this year or the next.”

3/5/1971

“Administrators Object to Black Grad Speaker” (p. 3)

<https://dspace.swem.wm.edu/bitstream/handle/10288/4871/fh19710305.pdf?sequence=1>

“Administration officials this week voiced reluctance about inviting Charles Evers, black mayor of Fayette, Miss. to speak at graduation after receiving notification that Mayor of New York John Lindsay will not be able to address the graduates.

. . . “In search of a substitute, both Paschall and Vice-President W. Melville Jones indicated that Evers, the seniors’ second choice, ‘might not be appropriate’, according to Senior Class President Dave Bernd.

“Bernd stated that Paschall described graduation speakers as having a ‘captive audience’, implying that Evers, the first black mayor of Mississippi since Reconstruction, might offend some parents and alumni.

“Bernd added that Paschall indicated that Evers might have some appeal to the emotions. . .

“Jones also stated that Fulbright, the class’s third choice might be more acceptable than Evers” . . .

3/12/71

“Paschall Bypasses Berndt, Picks Graduation Speaker” (p. 1)

<https://dspace.swem.wm.edu/bitstream/handle/10288/4373/fh19710312.pdf?sequence=1>

“In a move surprising to senior class leaders, President of the College Davis Y. Paschall informed members of the Administrative Council Monday that he intends to issue an invitation to an as-yet unidentified graduation speaker of his choice, following indications last week that the second choice of the seniors--black mayor of Fayette, Miss. Charles Evers, might not be ‘appropriate.’

“The class first choice, Mayor John Lindsay, was issued an invitation by Paschall but declined about three weeks ago. Administration leaders subsequently indicated that Evers might be opposed by ‘certain elements’ such as the Board of Visitors and alumni.

“Senior class President Dave Bernd expressed shock at the decision, which was released in a meeting with Vice President for Academic Affairs W. Melville Jones. . . . [who said] It’s entirely in his (Paschall’s) hands now, not mine or the Administrative Council or anyone else’s.”

In a release issued subsequently, “Paschall indicated that he was ‘proceeding in inviting a commencement speaker.’

“Paschall, the release continued, feels that ‘the commencement audience includes all segments of the college community and as such, requires careful selection of a speaker.’”

Editorial Page (p. 2)

“Ask Evers”

“Charles Evers is a black man. That fact may or may not be significant in determining whether or not he will be allowed to address William and Mary graduates this spring, but it is certain to be noticed.

“When seniors voted John Lindsay as their first choice for speaker, there were no murmurings from the administration as to the equity of the selection process. . . . Only when second choice Evers emerged as the students’ preference did President Paschall begin to see graduations as an ‘all-College’ affair. Only then did he decide that all segments of the College. . . . should be consulted. . . .

“The President has no right to disregard the expressed will of the senior class in choosing a speaker, even if he does have the technical power to do so. His conspicuous interference at this late date, . . . certainly does not appear free of bias.”

4/2/1971

Letters to the Editor (p. 2)

“Cynic Disapproves of Administrative Aesthetics, Duplicity”

<https://dspace.swem.wm.edu/bitstream/handle/10288/5067/fh19710402.pdf?sequence=1>

. . . “I find administration duplicity in regard to the graduation speaker to be far more serious [than the issue of wearing academic robes to commencement]. As I understand

it, the first choice of the seniors' referendum (Mayor Lindsay) was contacted by the administration and no particular objections were raised then in regard to the nature of the poll.

"Yet, when it so happens, that Mr. Lindsay (who though he may be a pronounced liberal is most exceedingly white) is unable to accept our invitation, there seems to be a great deal of hesitation as to the next step to take. Logically, one would think it a simple matter to invite the second choice, Mr. Charles Evers. Yet, at this point the not so subtle scourge of racism which is so entwined in the long history of this august institution rears its ugly head.

"Evers, one finds - 'might not be appropriate'; indeed, 'he might offend some parents and alumni.' Accordingly, objections are suddenly raised as to the fairness of the speaker referendum, objections which were either nonexistent or unspoken when the intended choice was a white man.

4/6/1971

"No Graduation Speaker Yet. . ." (p. 1)

<https://dspace.swem.wm.edu/bitstream/handle/10288/4847/fh19710406.pdf?sequence=1>

. . . "Paschall also indicated that he was continuing the search for a graduation speaker since the four speakers invited so far had declined.

. . . "In his search for a graduation speaker who would appeal 'to all segments of the college community', Paschall stated that four speakers contacted so far. . . were unable to attend.

"He added, 'I have no public statement to make' in regard to continuing senior class pressure to invite black mayor of Fayette, Miss., Charles Evers, to speak at commencement. . . .

"In his search for a graduation speaker who would appeal to 'all segments of the college community', Paschall stated that four speakers contacted so far . . . were unable to attend."

. . . [Senior Class President Dave Bernd]: "I personally think Paschall is going to be in a bad position if he can't get anyone else and hasn't invited Evers."

4/16/1971

Letters to the Editor (p. 2)

"Paschall's 'Racist' presence [at a model Sedar] a 'Serious Insult'"

<https://dspace.swem.wm.edu/bitstream/handle/10288/4578/fh19710416.pdf?sequence=1>

"Last night I attended the model Sedar which was held in the Campus Center Ballroom. . .

". . . the presence and participation of President Davis Y. Paschall, whose blatantly racist behavior, past and present, has disgraced the College in so many ways, was a serious insult to me as a Jew and a Human Being. This man, who piously mouthed the message

of Human Liberation contained in the Hagadah of Passover, is the same man who refuses to permit Mr. Charles Evers to address the senior class at commencement. . . .

“No man can claim to be a friend to the Jew who is not likewise friend to the Black Man. If Dr. Paschall would like to prove his sincerity in regard to the words he read, let him do so by inviting Mr. Evers to speak at graduation exercises without further delay.”

[And]

“Condemns Paschall For ‘Racist Decision’; Asks Action”

“I was pleased to read Mr. Thomas Rees’ letter in the April 2 Flat Hat. I only regret that I have not heard more seniors show some indignation over the decision by President Paschall regarding Mr. Charles Evers as a graduation speaker who ‘might offend some parents and alumni.’ . . .

“. . . Seniors, if no action is taken by you, you will be condoning this racist decision.

“. . . What will your degree mean to you if you must face the fact that it comes from an intolerant racist institution? . . .

“There is no proper compromise with racism.”

4/30/1971

“Paschall Chooses Downing; Seniors Act to Ask Evers” (p. 1)

<https://dspace.swem.wm.edu/bitstream/handle/10288/5171/fh19710430.pdf?sequence=1>

“President Davis Y. Paschall announced Wednesday that Rep. Thomas N. Downing of Newport News will deliver the commencement address at the College June 6.

“In making this selection, Paschall disregarded the senior class’s second choice for speaker, Charles Evers, the black mayor of Fayette, Miss. . .

“Paschall noted earlier this month that Evers might be ‘inappropriate’ as a speaker in that he might be ‘opposed’ by certain factions of the College community such as the Board of Visitors or Alumni.

“Evers to Speak

“The announcement of Downing as speaker prompted the senior class officers to contact Evers, who has agreed to be in Williamsburg the day of Commencement exercises to address students at a special assembly tentatively set for that morning.

“. . . Discussing the decision to invite Evers, Dave Bernd, president of the senior class, said, “The invitation to Evers to speak was not given until we found that Downing had already been invited. This is in no way a personal affront to Congressman Downing, but reflects the interest of the senior class to hear a speaker of their choice.

“We contacted Evers . . . He said he would very much like to speak at The College. He does not want to be involved in interrupting Commencement itself. He is just coming to talk to the students.”

“. . . Evers is asking for a fee of \$1,000 which should go toward his campaign for governor of Mississippi. This money will have to be raised between now and June 6 . . .”

Editorial Page (p. 2)

“Suitable Substitute?”

“The choice of Representative Thomas N. Downing as this year’s graduation speaker is both mystifying and blatantly hypocritical.

“If the real reason President Paschall rejected Evers was, as stated, that Evers is not of sufficient national prominence, then it appears that Downing is a more than inadequate substitute

“The fact that Paschall had earlier mentioned that he would like to steer clear of politicians presents an even clearer discrepancy, . . .

In view of these things, it appears that the administration’s action in rejecting Evers and replacing him with someone much less suitable, even by their own criteria, will be viewed as a racist one--whether it was intended as such or not. And it is certainly not a very fortuitous occurrence for an institution still under HEW fire on charges of racial discrimination.

“The senior class is bringing Evers here to speak; it is important that the College turn out in strength to hear him.”

Letters to the Editor (p. 2)

“Charles Evers Replies to Letter” [from a student, published on the same page]

“. . . I am truly sorry that you and the other members of the Senior Class at William and Mary have been balked at your attempts to secure the commencement speaker you wished to have. And at the same time I am not unmindful of the great honor you have attempted to bestow upon me. I am sincerely regretful at this turn of events.

“However, if you and all the others of the Class of ’71 who feel as you do can take this experience as an object lesson of what racism has done in our country, and can attempt in your future lives to help get rid of discrimination in all its forms, this temporary setback can be turned into permanent victory. . . .”

Charles Evers, Mayor
Fayette, Miss.

5/14/1971

“Paschall Grants Gym For Evers” (p. 1)

<https://dspace.swem.wm.edu/bitstream/handle/10288/5427/fh19710514.pdf?sequence=1>

“Definite plans are now set for Charles Evers, mayor of Fayette, Miss., to address the College community June 6 at 10:30 am in Blow Gym, according to Craig Windham, treasurer of the senior class. . . .

“Concerning the use of the gym facilities for Evers’ speech, Windham said “It looked like we weren't going to get any decent facilities since [they] wanted to stick us out at the Matoaka amphitheater.

“This was a definite compromise. My compliments to President Davis Y. Paschall who personally arranged the compromise.’

“Windham also noted that the time of the speech was specified so that the students must be out by noon in order to avoid any disruption of graduation exercises.

“Concerning the possibility of a protest at graduation exercises, Bisset said, ‘We are planning some expression of our discontent and we urge any seniors who might be upset about the circumstances concerning graduation and the selection of a speaker not to stay home and fume, but to come out and express their dissatisfaction.’

“... financial problems associated with bringing Evers to the College to speak. ... the approximate cost is \$1,000; so far the junior and sophomore classes have pledged \$150 and the SA has pledged up to \$500.”