Statement From Morehouse College President John Silvanus Wilson About U.S. Universities Debate Championships Tournament Motion

To Whom It May Concern:

I write to strongly take issue with several reports that erroneously suggest that Morehouse College, through its faculty, administration, or employees, had any role in shaping the controversial debate motion that offends the values of Morehouse and many others.

Two years ago, Morehouse College launched a bid to host the U.S. Universities Debate Championships ("USUDC"). Consistent with best practice, the Morehouse bid included two prominent members of the debating community to serve as the tournament’s Chief Adjudicators (CAs) of an independent Adjudication Core -- Sam Ward-Packard from Yale University, and Sharmila Paramanand from the Policy and Advocacy Director for Visayan Forum in the Phillipines. The U.S. Universities Debate Association ("USUDA") voted to approve this team for this role.

After being approved, the CAs selected three deputy chief adjudicators. This independent "Adjudication Core" crafted the motions for debate at the USUDC with input from neither the Morehouse Convening Team, nor the College leadership. On behalf of the College, the Morehouse Convening Team operated the tournament as hosts performing the labor necessary to make the tournament function. While Morehouse College was indeed honored to be the first
historically black college or university (HBCU) to serve as a USUDC convening institution, Morehouse College did not endorse, select, approve, or have any advance knowledge of any of the motions used during the seven preliminary rounds of competition. No host institution ever advocates and/or endorses the motions set at any debate tournament. A debate tournament facilitates an exchange of advocacy, but it is not itself an advocacy. Nor is it sensible to associate the host institution with the ideas to be debated, in this case, by nearly 400 visitors from more than sixty American colleges and universities.

Morehouse College has confirmed that the Adjudication Core set the round six motion concerning Palestinian violence without any input or review by the Morehouse Convening Team. In fact, the Morehouse Convening Team was just as shocked and upset as some members of the USUDA that such a motion was set. Morehouse and the Convening Team for the tournament abhors violence in all of its forms, and is committed to social justice for all people. In fact, a member of the Morehouse Convening team included a Jewish Ph.D. candidate who was equally offended by the motion.

We understand the reason why some have expressed concern that such a topic would be debated at all, and especially on a campus like Morehouse College. A significant part of our institutional brand derives from the nonviolent protest movement that made such a difference in the current quality of American life. Many of the foot soldiers for that nonviolent movement were groomed on the campus of Morehouse College and at surrounding and regional HBCU campuses. We remain committed to the lofty values associated with our brand.

Moreover, Morehouse College values the longstanding relationship it has had with Israel and the American Jewish communities. I made my first trip to Israel last summer and we remain encouraged by the possibility of building relationships with the higher education community in that country. When we forge those relationships, we will do so proudly grounded in who we are, as one of America’s most consequential institutions of learning.

At Morehouse College, there simply is no debate about whether gratuitous violence can ever be morally justified. We believe that a debate that seeks to justify violence against any innocent civilians is a contradiction to who we are and who we will continue to be.
In the words of our most illustrious graduate, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

John S. Wilson, Jr.
President, Morehouse College

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**Morehouse College**

Ranked America’s fifth “Most Entrepreneurial College” by Forbes Magazine in 2015, Morehouse College is the nation’s largest liberal arts college for men. Founded in 1867, the College enrolls approximately 2,100 students and historically has conferred more bachelor’s degrees on black men than any other institution in the world. Morehouse College has produced more Rhodes Scholars than any other HBCU. Prominent alumni include Martin Luther King Jr., Nobel Peace Prize laureate; Dr. David Satcher, former U.S. Surgeon General; Shelton “Spike” Lee, American filmmaker; Maynard H. Jackson, the first African American mayor of Atlanta, Ga.; and Jeh Johnson, the Secretary of Homeland Security.