

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Remarks at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Dedication

BARACK OBAMA

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Since August 2011, the National Mall in Washington, DC contains a large monument in memory of Martin Luther King Jr., erected, according to the official vision statement, to “captur[e] the essence of his message, a message in which he so eloquently affirms the commanding tenets of the American Dream—Freedom, Democracy and Opportunity for All; a noble quest that gained him the Nobel Peace Prize and one that continues to influence people and societies throughout the world.” The monument comprises The Stone of Hope, a massive thirty-foot relief statue of King, set between two pieces of stone that symbolize “The Mountain of Despair,” and a 450-foot Inscription Wall containing excerpts from many of his speeches and sermons. On October 16, 2011 President Barack Obama (b. 1961) gave the following speech at the dedication ceremony for the monument.¹

What, according to President Obama, is the meaning and purpose of the monument? Why and for which things, according to this speech, do we honor King? Compare his reasons to those offered by Presidents Reagan and Clinton? Whose reasons most appeal to you, and why?

An earthquake and a hurricane may have delayed this day, but this is a day that would not be denied.

For this day, we celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s return to the National Mall. In this place, he will stand for all time, among monuments to those who fathered this nation and those who defended it; a black preacher with no official rank or title who somehow gave voice to our deepest dreams and our most lasting ideals, a man who stirred our conscience and thereby helped make our union more perfect.

¹ Watch a video recording of President Obama’s dedication speech here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OR8GEDjT-x4. To take a photographic tour of the memorial, see <http://dc.about.com/od/monumentphotos/ss/MLKMemorialPhotos.htm>.

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And Dr. King would be the first to remind us that this memorial is not for him alone. The movement of which he was a part depended on an entire generation of leaders. Many are here today, and for their service and their sacrifice, we owe them our everlasting gratitude. This is a monument to your collective achievement.

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Some giants of the civil rights movement—like Rosa Parks and Dorothy Height, Benjamin Hooks, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth—they’ve been taken from us these past few years. This monument attests to their strength and their courage, and while we miss them dearly, we know they rest in a better place.

And finally, there are the multitudes of men and women whose names never appear in the history books—those who marched and those who sang, those who sat in and those who stood firm, those who organized and those who mobilized—all those men and women who through countless acts of quiet heroism helped bring about changes few thought were even possible. “By the thousands,” said Dr. King, “faceless, anonymous, relentless young people, black and white . . . have taken our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.” To those men and women, to those foot soldiers for justice, know that this monument is yours, as well.

Nearly half a century has passed since that historic March on Washington, a day when thousands upon thousands gathered for jobs and for freedom. That is what our schoolchildren remember best when they think of Dr. King—his booming voice across this Mall, calling on America to make freedom a reality for all of God’s children, prophesizing of a day when the jangling discord of our nation would be transformed into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

It is right that we honor that march, that we lift up Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech—for without that shining moment, without Dr. King’s glorious words, we might not have had the courage to come as far as we have. Because of that hopeful vision, because of Dr. King’s moral imagination, barricades began to fall and bigotry began to fade. New doors of opportunity swung open for an entire generation. Yes, laws changed, but hearts and minds changed, as well.

Look at the faces here around you, and you see an America that is more fair and more free and more just than the one Dr. King addressed that day. We are right to savor that slow but certain progress—progress that’s expressed itself in a million ways, large and

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small, across this nation every single day, as people of all colors and creeds live together, and work together, and fight alongside one another, and learn together, and build together, and love one another.

So it is right for us to celebrate today Dr. King's dream and his vision of unity. And yet it is also important on this day to remind ourselves that such progress did not come easily; that Dr. King's faith was hard-won; that it sprung out of a harsh reality and some bitter disappointments.

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It is right for us to celebrate Dr. King's marvelous oratory, but it is worth remembering that progress did not come from words alone. Progress was hard. Progress was purchased through enduring the smack of billy clubs and the blast of fire hoses. It was bought with days in jail cells and nights of bomb threats. For every victory during the height of the civil rights movement, there were setbacks and there were defeats.

We forget now, but during his life, Dr. King wasn't always considered a unifying figure. Even after rising to prominence, even after winning the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. King was vilified by many, denounced as a rabble rouser and an agitator, a communist and a radical. He was even attacked by his own people, by those who felt he was going too fast or those who felt he was going too slow; by those who felt he shouldn't meddle in issues like the Vietnam War or the rights of union workers. We know from his own testimony the doubts and the pain this caused him, and that the controversy that would swirl around his actions would last until the fateful day he died.

I raise all this because nearly 50 years after the March on Washington, our work, Dr. King's work, is not yet complete. We gather here at a moment of great challenge and great change. In the first decade of this new century, we have been tested by war and by tragedy; by an economic crisis and its aftermath that has left millions out of work, and poverty on the rise, and millions more just struggling to get by. Indeed, even before this crisis struck, we had endured a decade of rising inequality and stagnant wages. In too many troubled neighborhoods across the country, the conditions of our poorest citizens appear little changed from what existed 50 years ago—neighborhoods with underfunded schools and broken-down slums, inadequate health care, constant violence, neighborhoods in which too many young people grow up with little hope and few prospects for the future.

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Our work is not done. And so on this day, in which we celebrate a man and a movement that did so much for this country, let us draw strength from those earlier struggles. First and foremost, let us remember that change has never been quick. Change has never been simple, or without controversy. Change depends on persistence. Change requires determination. It took a full decade before the moral guidance of *Brown v. Board of Education* was translated into the enforcement measures of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, but those 10 long years did not lead Dr. King to give up. He kept on pushing, he kept on speaking, he kept on marching until change finally came.

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And then when, even after the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act passed, African Americans still found themselves trapped in pockets of poverty across the country, Dr. King didn't say those laws were a failure; he didn't say this is too hard; he didn't say, let's settle for what we got and go home. Instead he said, let's take those victories and broaden our mission to achieve not just civil and political equality but also economic justice; let's fight for a living wage and better schools and jobs for all who are willing to work. In other words, when met with hardship, when confronting disappointment, Dr. King refused to accept what he called the "isness" of today. He kept pushing towards the "oughtness" of tomorrow.

And so, as we think about all the work that we must do—rebuilding an economy that can compete on a global stage, and fixing our schools so that every child—not just some, but every child—gets a world-class education, and making sure that our health care system is affordable and accessible to all, and that our economic system is one in which everybody gets a fair shake and everybody does their fair share, let us not be trapped by what is. We can't be discouraged by what is. We've got to keep pushing for what ought to be, the America we ought to leave to our children, mindful that the hardships we face are nothing compared to those Dr. King and his fellow marchers faced 50 years ago, and that if we maintain our faith, in ourselves and in the possibilities of this nation, there is no challenge we cannot surmount.

And just as we draw strength from Dr. King's struggles, so must we draw inspiration from his constant insistence on the oneness of man; the belief in his words that "we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." It was that insistence, rooted in his Christian faith, that led him to tell a group of angry young protesters, "I love you as I love my own children," even as one threw a rock that glanced off his neck.

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It was that insistence, that belief that God resides in each of us, from the high to the low, in the oppressor and the oppressed, that convinced him that people and systems could change. It fortified his belief in nonviolence. It permitted him to place his faith in a government that had fallen short of its ideals. It led him to see his charge not only as freeing black America from the shackles of discrimination, but also freeing many Americans from their own prejudices, and freeing Americans of every color from the depredations of poverty.

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And so at this moment, when our politics appear so sharply polarized, and faith in our institutions so greatly diminished, we need more than ever to take heed of Dr. King's teachings. He calls on us to stand in the other person's shoes; to see through their eyes; to understand their pain. He tells us that we have a duty to fight against poverty, even if we are well off; to care about the child in the decrepit school even if our own children are doing fine; to show compassion toward the immigrant family, with the knowledge that most of us are only a few generations removed from similar hardships.

To say that we are bound together as one people, and must constantly strive to see ourselves in one another, is not to argue for a false unity that papers over our differences and ratifies an unjust status quo. As was true 50 years ago, as has been true throughout human history, those with power and privilege will often decry any call for change as "divisive." They'll say any challenge to the existing arrangements are unwise and destabilizing. Dr. King understood that peace without justice was no peace at all; that aligning our reality with our ideals often requires the speaking of uncomfortable truths and the creative tension of nonviolent protest.

But he also understood that to bring about true and lasting change, there must be the possibility of reconciliation; that any social movement has to channel this tension through the spirit of love and mutuality.

If he were alive today, I believe he would remind us that the unemployed worker can rightly challenge the excesses of Wall Street without demonizing all who work there; that the businessman can enter tough negotiations with his company's union without vilifying the right to collectively bargain. He would want us to know we can argue fiercely about the proper size and role of government without questioning each other's love for this country with the knowledge that in this democracy, government is no distant object but is rather an expression of our common commitments to one another. He would call on us to

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assume the best in each other rather than the worst, and challenge one another in ways that ultimately heal rather than wound.

In the end, that's what I hope my daughters take away from this monument. I want them to come away from here with a faith in what they can accomplish when they are determined and working for a righteous cause. I want them to come away from here with a faith in other people and a faith in a benevolent God. This sculpture, massive and iconic as it is, will remind them of Dr. King's strength, but to see him only as larger than life would do a disservice to what he taught us about ourselves. He would want them to know that he had setbacks, because they will have setbacks. He would want them to know that he had doubts, because they will have doubts. He would want them to know that he was flawed, because all of us have flaws.

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It is precisely because Dr. King was a man of flesh and blood and not a figure of stone that he inspires us so. His life, his story, tells us that change can come if you don't give up. He would not give up, no matter how long it took, because in the smallest hamlets and the darkest slums, he had witnessed the highest reaches of the human spirit; because in those moments when the struggle seemed most hopeless, he had seen men and women and children conquer their fear; because he had seen hills and mountains made low and rough places made plain, and the crooked places made straight and God make a way out of no way.

And that is why we honor this man—because he had faith in us. And that is why he belongs on this Mall—because he saw what we might become. That is why Dr. King was so quintessentially American—because for all the hardships we've endured, for all our sometimes tragic history, ours is a story of optimism and achievement and constant striving that is unique upon this Earth. And that is why the rest of the world still looks to us to lead. This is a country where ordinary people find in their hearts the courage to do extraordinary things; the courage to stand up in the face of the fiercest resistance and despair and say this is wrong, and this is right; we will not settle for what the cynics tell us we have to accept and we will reach again and again, no matter the odds, for what we know is possible.

That is the conviction we must carry now in our hearts. As tough as times may be, I know we will overcome. I know there are better days ahead. I know this because of the man towering over us. I know this because all he and his generation endured—we are here today in a country that dedicated a monument to that legacy.

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And so with our eyes on the horizon and our faith squarely placed in one another, let us keep striving; let us keep struggling; let us keep climbing toward that promised land of a nation and a world that is more fair, and more just, and more equal for every single child of God.

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Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.



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