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Remarks for Senator Barack Obama: Remembering Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Fort Wayne, IN | April 04, 2008

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As Mike said, today represents a tragic anniversary for our country. Through his faith, courage, and wisdom, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. moved an entire nation. He preached the gospel of brotherhood; of equality and justice. That's the cause for which he lived - and for which he died forty years ago today. And so before we begin, I ask you to join me in a moment of silence in memory of this extraordinary American.

There's been a lot of discussion this week about how Dr. King's life and legacy speak to us today. It's taking place in our schools and churches, on television and around the dinner table. And I suspect that much of what folks are talking about centers on issues of racial justice - on the Montgomery bus boycott and the March on Washington, on the freedom rides and the stand at Selma.

And that's as it should be - because those were times when ordinary men and women, straight-backed and clear-eyed, challenged what they knew was wrong and helped perfect our union. And they did so in large part because Dr. King pointed the way.

But I also think it's worth reflecting on what Dr. King was doing in Memphis, when he stepped onto that motel balcony on his way out for dinner.

And what he was doing was standing up for struggling sanitation workers. For years, these workers had served their city without complaint, picking up other people's trash for little pay and even less respect. Passers-by would call them "walking buzzards," and in the segregated South, most were forced to use separate drinking fountains and bathrooms.

But in 1968, these workers decided they'd had enough, and over 1,000 went on strike. Their demands were modest - better wages, better benefits, and recognition of their union. But the opposition was fierce. Their vigils were met with handcuffs. Their protests turned back with mace. And at the end of one march, a 16-year old boy lay dead.

This is the struggle that brought Dr. King to Memphis. It was a struggle for economic justice, for the opportunity that should be available to people of all races and all walks of life. Because Dr. King understood that the struggle for economic justice and the struggle for racial justice were really one - that each was part of a larger struggle "for freedom, for dignity, and for humanity." So long as Americans were trapped in poverty, so long as they were being denied the wages, benefits, and fair treatment they deserved - so long as opportunity was being opened to some but not all - the dream that he spoke of would remain out of reach.

And on the eve of his death, Dr. King gave a sermon in Memphis about what the movement there meant to him and to America. And in tones that would prove eerily prophetic, Dr. King said that despite the threats he'd received, he didn't fear any man, because he had been there when Birmingham aroused the conscience of this nation. And he'd been there to see the students stand up for freedom by sitting in at lunch counters. And he'd been there in Memphis when it was dark enough to see the stars, to see the community coming together around a common purpose. So Dr. King had been to the mountaintop. He

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Table with 3 columns: WHERE WE ARE, OBAMA, CLINTON. Rows: Contests (34, 19), Total Delegates (2187.5, 1927)

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WEDIDIT 0 PLEDGED DELEGATES needed for a majority (of pledged delegates)
WEDIDIT 0 TOTAL DELEGATES needed for the nomination

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had seen the Promised Land. And while he knew somewhere deep in his bones that he would not get there with us, he knew that we would get there.

He knew it because he had seen that Americans have "the capacity," as he said that night, "to project the 'I' into the 'thou.'" To recognize that no matter what the color of our skin, no matter what faith we practice, no matter how much money we have - no matter whether we are sanitation workers or United States Senators - we all have a stake in one another, we are our brother's keeper, we are our sister's keeper, and "either we go up together, or we go down together."

And when he was killed the following day, it left a wound on the soul of our nation that has yet to fully heal. And in few places was the pain more pronounced than in Indianapolis, where Robert Kennedy happened to be campaigning. And it fell to him to inform a crowded park that Dr. King had been killed. And as the shock turned toward anger, Kennedy reminded them of Dr. King's compassion, and his love. And on a night when cities across the nation were alight with violence, all was quiet in Indianapolis.

In the dark days after Dr. King's death, Coretta Scott King pointed out the stars. She took up her husband's cause and led a march in Memphis. But while those sanitation workers eventually got their union contract, the struggle for economic justice remains an unfinished part of the King legacy. Because the dream is still out of reach for too many Americans. Just this morning, it was announced that more Americans are unemployed now than at any time in years. And all across this country, families are facing rising costs, stagnant wages, and the terrible burden of losing a home.

Part of the problem is that for a long time, we've had a politics that's been too small for the scale of the challenges we face. This is something I spoke about a few weeks ago in a speech I gave in Philadelphia. And what I said was that instead of having a politics that lives up to Dr. King's call for unity, we've had a politics that's used race to drive us apart, when all this does is feed the forces of division and distraction, and stop us from solving our problems.

That is why the great need of this hour is much the same as it was when Dr. King delivered his sermon in Memphis. We have to recognize that while we each have a different past, we all share the same hopes for the future - that we'll be able to find a job that pays a decent wage, that there will be affordable health care when we get sick, that we'll be able to send our kids to college, and that after a lifetime of hard work, we'll be able to retire with security. They're common hopes, modest dreams. And they're at the heart of the struggle for freedom, dignity, and humanity that Dr. King began, and that it is our task to complete.

You know, Dr. King once said that the arc of the moral universe is long, but that it bends toward justice. But what he also knew was that it doesn't bend on its own. It bends because each of us puts our hands on that arc and bends it in the direction of justice.

So on this day - of all days - let's each do our part to bend that arc.

Let's bend that arc toward justice.

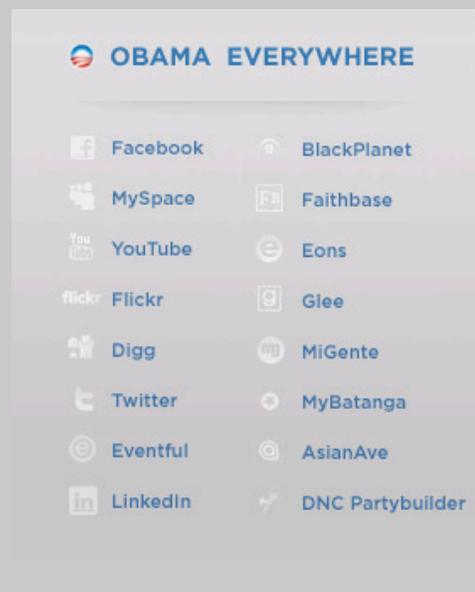
Let's bend that arc toward opportunity.

Let's bend that arc toward prosperity for all.

And if we can do that and march together - as one nation, and one people - then we won't just be keeping faith with what Dr. King lived and died for, we'll be making real the words of Amos that he invoked so often, and "let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."



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