

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Day: Answering the Call

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What a great day we have been given to serve together! It is fitting that we remember those who met the challenges of the past to give us, our blessings of the present. It is now our charge to create opportunities for the future that lies ahead.

This is the 30th year since our nation has honored Dr. King with a federal holiday on his birthday. You know of his achievements from the many observations that we have celebrated in our military. You have heard Dr. King's speech many times over the past fifty years and have probably focused on the chorus, "I have a dream." But, there is a short section at the beginning of the speech that I would like to share with you. This is what I believe inspired the dream, the movement, and the 1963 March on Washington. It is what compelled our nation to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and led to Dr. King's being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Listen to his words:

"In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

How did this man of talent come to change a society and a nation?

Dr. King was born in Atlanta; the son of a minister. At an early age, he showed a passion and conviction of spirit that led him to the same vocation. He received a doctorate at the age of 26 from Boston University, and was on the path to becoming just as good a preacher as his father was. Through the course of his early ministry, his talent for oratory and leadership led him to a different path, one that he did not ask nor plan for, but to which he was called.

Today, I would like for us to reflect on those who, like Dr. King, have gone before us in the service of our country. Listen to this passage from the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 6 Verse 8. "And I heard the voice of the Lord saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, ['Here I am, Send me.'](#)" This has been the venerable reply of many people who have been called to service, and, who in the face of adversity, stood up to be counted in the pursuit of a higher good. Each of us in this room, uniformed and civilian, has committed to such service to our nation.

As Dr. King inevitably studied our American history, he would have known that [many blacks had answered that call](#), and served nobly in the fight for freedom and justice. With each gathering like this one here today, we celebrate those selfless heroes AND the tradition of service to our country. In Boston, a brass plaque hangs on a small patch of bricks marking the location of the Boston Massacre of 1770. At that spot, [Crispus Attucks](#), became the first martyr of the American Revolution. He was a black man, a runaway slave, who was at the forefront of America's quest for freedom. When called, he answered "Here I am, Send Me -- I will stand against tyranny and injustice. I will stand for liberty."

During the Civil War, with their freedom at stake, black Militiamen gave the Union forces the ability to defeat those who would oppress an entire race. This is the legacy of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment that was depicted in the movie ["Glory"](#). Those great men of our past each answered the call with "Here I am, Send Me--I will fight to end the oppression of my people; I will fight for the right to be free."

After the Civil War, black units were finally included in the Regular Army. Serving in the American West and on the Great Plains, they picked up the unforgettable name of [Buffalo Soldiers](#). Among that group was the first Black cadet to graduate from West Point, [LT Henry O. Flipper](#).

I have been to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and stood at the base of the beautiful [statue that captures the spirit of those Buffalo Soldiers](#) of the 9th and 10th Cavalry. I have that print which inspired the statue in my home. Though it is not common knowledge, these all-black units kept Teddy Roosevelt from losing the Battle of San Juan Hill and helped Brig. Gen. John "Black Jack" Pershing pursue Pancho Villa in 1916.

Despite the evidence of heroic actions of black American soldiers, our published U.S. military history reflected something to the contrary. Here is one study's conclusion:

"As combat troops under modern war conditions, [negroes] never rose to the standard of white units even when well led by white officers. The negro officers were educationally and, in character, far inferior to the whites, and troops under negro officers were unfit for battle against an aggressive and active enemy."

This was from a 1925 study conducted by the Army War College.

On August 25th, 1941, black Americans were finally given a chance to prove their stuff in the Army Air Corps. The [Tuskegee Airmen of the 332nd Fighter Group](#) "Red Tails" had the mission of escorting Allied bombers. Those black airmen accomplished this critical task with sheer skill, purpose of mind, and courage of conviction. They served proudly with the benefit of neither privilege nor courtesy. They answered the call by saying "Here we are, Send us--We will fight against injustice and for the liberty of others in foreign lands." Dr. King would have also known about [Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Senior](#)--the professor of Military Science at the Tuskegee Institute, who, in 1940, would become the first African-American to be selected and serve as a general officer.

In 2008, the U.S. Military celebrated a Diamond Anniversary--60 years since [President Harry S. Truman signed Executive](#)

[Orders directing fair employment practices for federal workers and the integration of the Armed Forces.](#) These were two victories in our nation's internal battle against racism and stereotypes. We know this war is not yet won. As Dr. King once said: "If there is injustice for one, there is injustice for all."

We know well the names of black Soldier-leaders of the past who answered their personal calls in the face of prejudice--Generals Chappie James and Ben O. Davis, Jr. were proud Tuskegee Airmen, as well as Vietnam-era Army Generals like [Julius Becton](#), [Roscoe Robinson](#), and [Medal of Honor Winner Charles Rogers](#) who carried the flag of those warriors from yesteryear.

These soldiers are among those African-Americans that Dr. King would have studied and watched. He would have noted their ability and talent, but also that the opportunity to realize their potential was something that was not available to all black Americans. Hence, Dr. King continued his speech with these words:

"It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in-so-far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check, which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check -- a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice."

Did Dr. King make a difference when he answered the call by not only saying "Here I am, Send me," but by also taking the risk of leadership?

The difference he made in my own life is clear. I grew up in Cleveland Ohio in the wake of the Civil Rights Act and experienced the riots in the summers of 1966 and 1968. When our nation was in turmoil, my family looked to Dr. King for spiritual direction, and more importantly, for hope.

I was a paperboy and the morning of April 5th, 1968, I delivered the Cleveland Plain Dealer, whose headline announced the assassination of Dr. King. While a bullet silenced the messenger, we know that it could not silence his message.

That following spring of 1969, I took a middle school trip from Cleveland to Atlanta to visit the [Dr. King Center](#) and gravesite. As a senior, I was honored to receive the first Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. award from Shaw High School.

In the fall of 1972, I was contacted by a West Point liaison officer who was recruiting young men of color to join the officer ranks of our Army. Among my fellow military academy cadets were Cadets Dorian Anderson (Cdr, JTF-6; CG, Human Resources Command), Lloyd Austin (Cdr, 10 Mtn Div, then 18th ABN Corps; he is currently Vice Chief of Staff, now nominated to be Commander, US Central Command), Ron Johnson (Deputy Chief, Army Corps of Engineers during Hurricane Katrina); Vince Brooks (commanded 1st Infantry Division and now 3rd Army); and Tom Bostick (was the Army G-1 and is now Chief of Army Corps of Engineers).

During those four years at West Point, I met officers of proven ability and great promise. Captain Larry Ellis was a boxing instructor and would go on to command the 1st Armored Div and then US Forces Command. Capt Larry Jordan was a history instructor; LTG Jordan became The Inspector General of the Army and my boss as the Deputy Commanding General, US Army Europe. And, an Asian American, Major Eric Shinseki, taught English and would be a squadron commander supported by then-Capt Allen in Schweinfurt, Germany. General Shinseki would become Commander, US Army Europe, then later the Vice Chief and Army Chief of Staff. He is now Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Within this collection of cadets and officers, our paths crossed several times over my 30-year career. Our opportunity to serve was directly attributable to the call that Dr. King answered. His response and actions enabled and inspired others to act for something beyond self and in the service of others. It is clear that Dr. King did make a difference in my life and the lives of other black service members.

He also made a difference in our nation when we consider names like Colin Powell, Condeleeza Rice, Susan Rice, and Barack Obama. Each of those names, from both political parties, brings to mind first intellect, talent, and character, then race. In response to a question asked of me during the 2008 presidential candidate nomination process, I told a close friend I did not think that America was ready to elect a woman or a black man as president. I was proven wrong, twice over.

During two campaigns, Barack Obama was not defeated nor was he elected because of the color of his skin. Dr. King might nod his head and smile and offer that Senator and now President Obama was judged on the content of his character and his ability to convey to the American people, "Here I am, Send me; I can lead this nation forward. I believe that change is possible for the betterment of all Americans." It is poignant that during yesterday's inauguration, Obama took his oath of office on the family Bible of Dr. King.

In closing, I think that Dr. King would have us to look around and notice where there are still inequities--in education, in employment, in economic conditions and in health care. In that famous speech at the Lincoln Memorial, he declared to us:

"I say to you today my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream."

He would now ask what are we doing to make a difference, to make his dream--NO! our dream come true. Dr. King would press us and challenge us to act.

Can you hear the call for service, above the noise of the world?

As an artillery lieutenant in Germany, I supported the 2nd Brigade of 3rd Infantry Division known as the "Send Me" Brigade. Over the two decades since the end of the Cold War, our Army has answered many calls of "Whom shall I send?" Our Army has conducted many deployments that you have been a part of in your careers -- Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Restore Hope in Somalia, Restore Democracy in Haiti, and as part of the missions in Bosnia and in Kosovo -- supporting basic human rights of life and liberty.

We are still engaged in prolonged conflicts across the globe. Today, as we read the papers and watch evening news programs, we know that on any given day, our military may be called by our nation to Go and Serve in yet another land.

How do we know if that call is just? How do we find that Stone of Hope among the Mountains of Despair.

Remember the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus said: "Blessed are the peace makers, for they will be called Sons of God."

Do we hear this call of "whom shall I send?" in our local communities? Listen. You have the opportunity to serve as role models within our units and within this community. You are role models to our fellow service members and employees, to your spouses and to our children. You are members of noble callings: military, civic leaders, teachers, and parents. You can answer this call by instilling values and demonstrating three very simple ways to live: Do the right thing, respect others, and do your best. You are the Stones of Hope for the present and future generations.

When called, What is your answer? Whom will you serve?

I will close with a passage from the Book of Joshua Chapter 24 Verse 15: "Choose this day who you will serve."

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