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Retired Army Col. Gary Steele, a West Point Graduate and the first African American Varsity Football Player to play at West Point, was the guest speaker for the 2017 Martin Luther King Jr. Observance Jan. 9.

Jan. 9, 2017 -- “Here is the challenge I will give you today – What will you do to make this a day on, not a day off and carry

on the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King?”

This was the question asked and challenge issued by retired Army Col. Gary Steele at the Carlisle Barracks observance of Martin Luther King Jan. 9 in Wil Washcoe Auditorium. Steele, the first African American Varsity Football Player to play at West Point, was the keynote speaker for the event honoring the legacy of King.

“As we celebrate Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King’s uncommon life of courage and conviction, devoted to selfless service pursuing a better life for all Americans and influencing so many around the world, it is appropriate that we have here today Carlisle’s own - Colonel Retired Gary Steele, who like many of us, has spent his life in pursuit of serving something bigger than himself,” said Lt. Col. Greg Ank, garrison commander, when introducing Steele.

Before his talk, Soldiers and civilians from Carlisle Barracks read three quotes from King, which Steele used to frame his discussion of the legacy of King.

“If we are to go forward, we must go back and rediscover those precious values - that all reality hinges on moral foundations and that all reality has spiritual control.”

“If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.”

“Not only will we have to repent for the sins of bad people; but we also will have to repent for the appalling silence of good people.”

Steele used quotes to help frame his discussion of the legacy of King.

He used the quotes to view King's legacy through a historical perspective, and discuss the value of adversity and confronting challenges when developing as a leader. Steele shared how the words, values and actions of King help guide him through his military and civilian career.



Steele opened his remarks by discussing the importance of mentors and those who came before him, including his father retired Buffalo Soldier Army Maj. Frank Steele, H. Milton Francis, the only African American cadet in the West Point Class of 1944, and King.

“So much changed in our nation from when my father served and Francis was a cadet. Martin roomed along, ate alone and was only spoken to when it was in an official capacity,” said Steele. He shared how much different life was for him and his brother at USMA in the 1960's. He faced the usual struggles that most "Plebes" have to overcome and then starred on the football field where he was West Point's first African-American letter winner in the sport of football.

“I was wonderfully naïve about many things in my life, and I give credit to Martin Luther King, my father and many others who worked hard to help move our country forward,” he said. “For me to move forward I had to look back on those who came before me, including Dr. King.”

Steele discussed how the value of adversity and dealing with and overcoming challenges is vital for any leader.

He shared a story about when he failed two courses at West Point and considered leaving school.

“My father said he supported my decision if that’s what I chose to do, but that West Point would have beaten me if I left,” he said. “I immediately made my decision to return to school.”

The experience, coupled with his research into the words and actions of King taught him a valuable lesson, he said.

”What I think we all need to take away from the legacy of Dr. King is that success is measured by what you do when you fail,” he said. “Do you roll over or get back up and do something about it?”

He closed by showing how the Army values echo many of the same values as King and how leaders can use them as touchstones when faced with challenges.

“If we live by the Army values, we are also living the vision of Dr. King,” he said. “He had a dream and as leaders, in and out of uniform, we have an obligation to follow his example. Make sure what you say matches what you do.”

About Steele

His service included assignments in Panama, Greece, and Belgium. Following his retirement in 1993, he held various corporate and public sector human resource positions in education, telecommunications, and pharmaceutical industries. Steele earned a Master’s degree in International Relations from Boston University, and in addition to holding a number of professional certifications.

About Dr. King

Martin Luther King Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia on 15 January 1929. The third Monday of every January is celebrated as Martin Luther King Jr. Day; despite not falling on his actual birth date. This day we celebrate the life and legacy of King. The National theme is "Remember! Celebrate! Act! A Day On, Not A Day Off!" Our country continues to REMEMBER and honor the tremendous accomplishments and sacrifices of King. We CELEBRATE the life and legacy of a man who brought hope and healing to America. We ACT with honor. Also, we must not forget: A DAY ON, NOT A DAY OFF, is a day of citizen action volunteer service in honor of King.