

MARTIN LUTHER KING CELEBRATION

JANUARY 16, 1994

[INTRODUCED BY ADMIRAL BYRON TOBIN, COMMANDER OF U.S. NAVAL FORCES JAPAN.]

ADMIRAL TOBIN ... GENERAL GRANRUD ... COLONEL MOORE ... LADIES AND GENTLEMAN OF THE U.S. ARMED FORCES ... I AM HONORED TO JOIN WITH YOU THIS EVENING IN CELEBRATING THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF A GREAT AMERICAN AND A REMARKABLE HUMAN BEING — THE REVEREND MARTIN LUTHER KING.

BY CELEBRATING THE ANNIVERSARY OF DR. KING'S BIRTHDAY WITH A NATIONAL HOLIDAY, WE HONOR HIS EXTRAORDINARY PERSONAL EFFORTS TO HELP MAKE REAL THE DREAM OF AMERICA AS A FREE AND JUST SOCIETY — TO FULFILL THE PROMISES OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, THE CONSTITUTION AND THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION.

BY CELEBRATING DR. KING, WE ALSO HONOR THE HISTORIC CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT WHICH HE HELPED TO LEAD. AND WE HONOR THE SPIRIT OF PEACEFUL CHANGE WHICH HE PREACHED AND WHICH WAS SYMBOLIZED BY OWN HIS LIFE.

DR. KING WAS, OF COURSE, A RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LEADER;

HE WAS ALSO AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN LEADER;

AND HE WAS AN AMERICAN LEADER.

BUT, ABOVE ALL, I BELIEVE THAT MARTIN LUTHER KING WAS A HUMAN LEADER. HE SPOKE TO THAT UNIVERSAL HUMAN ASPIRATION FOR FREEDOM, JUSTICE AND DIGNITY WHICH, HISTORY SHOWS, CAN NEVER BE EXTINGUISHED.

BY INSPIRING US WITH HIS WORDS AND DEEDS, DR. KING HELPED TRANSFORM AMERICA — AND THERE IS HARDLY A CORNER OF AMERICAN SOCIETY THAT WAS NOT CHANGED FOR THE BETTER.

THE UNITED STATES MILITARY, IN FACT, IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPRESSIVE SUCCESS STORIES IN AMERICAN RACE RELATIONS OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES — AND I BELIEVE IT CAN STAND AS A MODEL TO THE REST OF AMERICA IN THE WAY IT HAS OPENED UP EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES TO INDIVIDUAL AMERICANS REGARDLESS OF RACE.

AS ONE SCHOLAR DESCRIBED IT A FEW YEARS AGO: "BLACKS OCCUPY MORE MANAGEMENT POSITIONS IN THE MILITARY THAN THEY DO IN BUSINESS, EDUCATION, JOURNALISM, GOVERNMENT OR ANY OTHER SIGNIFICANT SECTOR OF AMERICAN SOCIETY." AND AS YOU WELL KNOW, UNTIL JUST A FEW MONTHS AGO, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF WAS A BLACK AMERICAN — COLIN POWELL.

THE NEW ADMINISTRATION OF WHICH I AM A MEMBER IS ALSO TRYING ITS BEST TO DRAW ON THE FULL TALENTS AND STRENGTH OF AMERICA'S DIVERSE POPULATION.

TODAY, THERE ARE NOW FIVE AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN THE CABINET OF THE UNITED STATES -- TWO AND A HALF TIMES AS MANY AS HAVE EVER SERVED AT ANY ONE TIME IN THE HISTORY OF OUR GREAT NATION.

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, ONE OF THESE CABINET MEMBERS — AGRICULTURE SECRETARY MIKE ESPY — WAS HERE IN JAPAN. I HAVE KNOWN MIKE FOR YEARS; HE IS A VERY IMPRESSIVE INDIVIDUAL. HE SERVED FOR SIX YEARS AS A MEMBER OF CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI BEFORE PRESIDENT CLINTON ASKED HIM TO SERVE IN THE CABINET. (IS ANYONE HERE THIS EVENING FROM MISSISSIPPI?)

NOW, I CAN REMEMBER THAT AS RECENTLY AS THE 1960S, WHEN I WAS A YOUNG U.S. SENATOR FROM MINNESOTA, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN ABSOLUTELY UNTHINKABLE THAT AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN MIGHT BE ELECTED TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS FROM MISSISSIPPI -- MUCH LESS THAT HE WOULD GO ON TO BECOME THE UNITED STATES SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE. UNTIL THE 1960S, AFRICAN AMERICANS WERE NOT EVEN ALLOWED TO VOTE IN MOST AREAS OF MISSISSIPPI.

[YOU MIGHT INCLUDE PERSONAL REMINISCENCES FROM THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT.]

THAT IS NOW HISTORY — THANKS TO THE EFFORTS OF DR. KING AND MILLIONS OF OTHER COURAGEOUS AMERICANS (OF ALL RACES) WHO FOUGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS. BUT OUR WORK IS NOT OVER YET.

TWO MONTHS AGO, PRESIDENT CLINTON GAVE A SPEECH IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE -- IN THE VERY SAME CHURCH WHERE MARTIN LUTHER KING GAVE HIS LAST SERMON. ON THAT OCCASION, THE PRESIDENT LOOKED BACK OVER THE QUARTER OF A CENTURY SINCE DR. KING'S DEATH.

HERE IS WHAT HE SAID:

IF DR. KING "WERE TO REAPPEAR BY MY SIDE TODAY AND GIVE US A REPORT CARD ON THE LAST 25 YEARS, WHAT WOULD HE SAY?

"YOU DID A GOOD JOB, HE WOULD SAY, VOTING AND ELECTING PEOPLE WHO FORMERLY WERE NOT ELECTABLE BECAUSE OF THE COLOR OF THEIR SKIN.

"YOU DID A GOOD JOB, HE WOULD SAY, LETTING PEOPLE WHO HAVE THE ABILITY TO DO SO LIVE WHEREVER THEY WANT TO LIVE AND GO WHEREVER THEY WANT TO GO IN THIS GREAT COUNTRY.

"YOU DID A GOOD JOB, HE WOULD SAY, ELEVATING PEOPLE OF COLOR INTO THE RANKS OF THE UNITED STATES ARMED FORCES TO THE VERY TOP AND INTO THE VERY TOP OF OUR GOVERNMENT.

"HE WOULD SAY YOU DID A GOOD JOB CREATING A BLACK MIDDLE CLASS OF PEOPLE WHO REALLY ARE DOING WELL — A MIDDLE CLASS THAT IS GROWING MORE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS THAN AMONG NON-AFRICAN AMERICANS.

"BUT HE WOULD SAY, I DID NOT LIVE AND DIE TO SEE THE AMERICAN FAMILY DESTROYED.

"I DID NOT LIVE AND DIE TO SEE 13-YEAR-OLD BOYS GET AUTOMATIC WEAPONS AND GUN DOWN NINE-YEAR-OLDS JUST FOR THE KICK OF IT.

"I DID NOT LIVE AND DIE TO SEE YOUNG PEOPLE DESTROY THEIR OWN LIVES WITH DRUGS AND THEN BUILD FORTUNES DESTROYING THE LIVES OF OTHERS.

"THAT IS NOT WHAT I CAME HERE TO DO.

"I FOUGHT FOR FREEDOM, HE WOULD SAY, BUT NOT FOR THE FREEDOM OF PEOPLE TO KILL EACH OTHER WITH RECKLESS ABANDON, NOT FOR THE FREEDOM OF CHILDREN TO HAVE CHILDREN AND THE FATHERS OF THE CHILDREN TO WALK AWAY FROM THEM AND ABANDON THEM AS IF THEY DON'T AMOUNT TO ANYTHING.

"I FOUGHT FOR PEOPLE TO HAVE THE RIGHT TO WORK, BUT NOT TO HAVE WHOLE COMMUNITIES AND PEOPLE ABANDONED. THIS IS NOT WHAT I LIVED AND DIED FOR.

"MY FELLOW AMERICANS, HE WOULD SAY, I FOUGHT TO STOP WHITE PEOPLE FROM BEING SO FILLED WITH HATE THAT THEY WOULD WREAK VIOLENCE ON BLACK PEOPLE. I DID NOT FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT OF BLACK PEOPLE TO MURDER OTHER BLACK PEOPLE WITH RECKLESS ABANDON."

NOW, THAT IS STRONG STUFF.

BUT I THINK WE MUST ACKNOWLEDGE ITS TRUTH. AND IT MEANS THAT OUR STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IS NOT YET FINISHED.

WE STILL HAVE A LOT TO OVERCOME — ALL OF US, AS AMERICANS.

WE MUST STILL OVERCOME THE DISADVANTAGES FROM WHICH SO MANY AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND OTHERS SUFFER AS A RESULT OF PAST OPPRESSION.

WE MUST STILL OVERCOME THE ACTIVE DISCRIMINATION, RACISM AND BIGOTRY THAT CONTINUES TO POISON AMERICAN SOCIETY (FOR I AM SAD TO SAY THERE ARE MANY AMERICANS FOR WHOM THE COLOR OF A PERSON'S SKIN CONTINUES TO MEAN MORE THAN THE CONTENT OF THEIR CHARACTER).

WE MUST STILL OVERCOME THE POVERTY TO WHICH MILLIONS OF AMERICANS — MANY OF THEM CHILDREN — ARE CONDEMNED.

WE MUST STILL OVERCOME THE TRAGEDY OF FAMILY BREAKDOWN AND DISARRAY THAT HARMS OUR CHILDREN AND WEAKENS THE FUTURE OF OUR SOCIETY.

AND WE MUST STILL OVERCOME THE SCOURGE OF DRUGS AND THE EPIDEMIC OF VIOLENCE THAT HAS TAKEN OVER OUR CITIES.

SO THERE IS PLENTY OF WORK THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE — AND WE ALL HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY.

THAT IS WHY I DO NOT WANT TO CONCLUDE ON A DESPAIRING NOTE. IF DR. KING TAUGHT US ANYTHING, IT IS THAT WE MUST ALWAYS HAVE HOPE — AND THAT HOPE IS ALWAYS ON OUR SIDE.

IN HIS SPEECH ACCEPTING THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE, DR. KING SAID:

"I ACCEPT THIS AWARD WITH AN ABIDING FAITH IN AMERICA AND AN AUDACIOUS FAITH IN THE FUTURE OF MANKIND. . .

"I REFUSE TO ACCEPT THE IDEA THAT MAN IS MERE FLOTSAM AND JETSAM IN THE RIVER OF LIFE WHICH SURROUNDS HIM.

"I REFUSE TO ACCEPT THE VIEW THAT MANKIND IS SO TRAGICALLY BOUND TO THE STARLESS MIDNIGHT OF RACISM AND WAR THAT THE BRIGHT DAYBREAK OF PEACE AND BROTHERHOOD CAN NEVER BECOME A REALITY. . . .

"I HAVE THE AUDACITY TO BELIEVE THAT PEOPLES EVERYWHERE CAN HAVE THREE MEALS A DAY FOR THEIR BODIES; EDUCATION AND CULTURE FOR THEIR MINDS; AND DIGNITY, EQUALITY AND FREEDOM FOR THEIR SPIRITS.

"I BELIEVE THAT WHAT SELF-CENTERED MEN HAVE TORN DOWN, [THOSE WHO ARE] OTHER-CENTERED CAN BUILD UP.

"I STILL BELIEVE THAT ONE DAY MANKIND WILL BOW BEFORE THE ALTARS OF GOD AND BE CROWNED TRIUMPHANT OVER WAR AND BLOODSHED, AND NONREDEMPTIVE GOODWILL WILL PROCLAIM THE RULE OF THE LAND.

"AND THE LION AND THE LAMB SHALL LIE DOWN TOGETHER AND EVERY MAN SHALL SIT UNDER HIS OWN VINE AND FIG TREE AND NONE SHALL BE AFRAID.'

"I STILL BELIEVE THAT WE SHALL OVERCOME."

NOBODY COULD SAY IT ANY BETTER.



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