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John McCain's Remarks To Southern Christian Leadership Conference

April 4, 2008

Honoring the Dream



Remembering Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Thank you. Alviada King, Ralph Abernathy Jr., Dr. Montgomery, members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference: I appreciate your kind invitation, and I am honored to stand with you at this place on this day. Martin Luther King, Jr., was not a man to flinch from harsh truth, and the same is required of all who come here to see where he was in the last hours of his life. The Lorraine Motel is a civil rights museum now, but in the memory of America it will always be a crime scene as well. On the National Register of Historic Places, there are few sites remembered with more regret, or touched with so much sorrow.

If we think only of that day and that moment, there is no inspiration to be gained here. The man we remember was a believer in the power of conscience and goodness to shape events. But this place will always stand as a reminder that cowardice and malevolence lay claim to their own victories. No good cause in this world -- however right in principle or pure in heart -- was ever advanced without sacrifice. And Dr. King knew this. He knew that men with nightsticks, tear-gas, and cattle prods were not the worst of what might be lying in wait each day and night. He was a man accustomed to the nearness of danger. And when death came, it found him standing upright, in open air, unafraid. We see him today from a distance of four decades, more time than the man himself lived on this earth. And it would not be unusual if his stature or reputation had faded with the passing of the years. It happens sometimes that the judgments of history overrule contemporary opinion, indifferent to the fame and approval of the moment. But this has not been the case with the firstborn son of Alberta and Martin Luther King, Sr. He only seems a bigger man from far away. The quality of his character is only more apparent. His good name will be honored for as long as the creed of America is honored. His message will be heard and understood for as long as the message of the gospels is heard and understood.

Forty years and more after the great struggles of the civil rights movement, we marvel that such fierce passions could be aroused in defense of such petty cruelties. Separate lunch counters, the preferred seat on a bus, one restroom for whites and another for everyone else -- these were among the prerogatives fought for as if on a point of the highest principle. There is no end to human pride when it goes unchecked, no limit to arrogance and presumption when they pass uncorrected. Like every citizen he spoke for, Martin Luther King had seen the underside of life in America, where the rules of respect, and fairness, and courtesy were thought not to apply. It was a humiliating existence, unjust in matters both large and small, merciless in its routine of insult, sparing not even the elderly or little children from its crude bullying. For black men and women, as Dr. King wrote, it was a life "plagued with inner fears and outer resentments." And yet, as he knew, fear alone would never right the offense. And resentment alone would never overcome the wrong. "Along the way of life," he said, "someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil. The greatest way to do that is through love."

Martin Luther King today is honored by the world, in such a way that it is easy to forget he once knew the scorn of the world. And it wasn't just force of personality that made him the man he was. It was the power of truth, spoken with a servant's heart and a voice like no other. He put it this way once,

expressing the spirit of both the cause and its leader: "I said to myself over and over again, 'Keep Martin Luther King in the background and God in the foreground and everything will be all right. Remember you are a channel of the gospel and not the source.'" When Dr. King and his comrades began to break that chain with their campaign of peaceful protest, there were those who said, "Wait. Just give it a little more time. Be patient. Be patient, and one day America will come around." But patience had been tried, over many generations, and still millions lived in what he called the smothering, airtight cage of injustice. For his marches in Birmingham, Montgomery, and elsewhere, for his sit-ins and his sermons, he was called an agitator, a trouble-maker, a malcontent, and a disturber of the peace. These are often the terms applied to men and women of conscience who will not endure cruelty, nor abide injustice. We hear them to this day -- in Darfur, Zimbabwe, Burma, Tibet, Iran and other lands -- directed at every brave soul who dares to disturb the peace of tyrants.

Sometimes the most radical thing is to be confronted with our own standards -- to be asked simply that we live up to the principles we profess. Even in this most idealistic of nations, we do not always take kindly to being reminded of what more we can do, or how much better we can be, or who else can be included in the promise of America. We can be slow as well to give greatness its due, a mistake I made myself long ago when I voted against a federal holiday in memory of Dr. King. I was wrong and eventually realized that, in time to give full support for a state holiday in Arizona. We can all be a little late sometimes in doing the right thing, and Dr. King understood this about his fellow Americans. But he knew as well that in the long term, confidence in the reasonability and good heart of America is always well placed. And always, that was his method in word and action -- to remind us of who we are and what we believe. His arguments were unanswerable and they were familiar, the case always resting on the writings of the Founders, the teachings of the prophets, and the Word of the Lord.

Perhaps with more charity than was always deserved, he often reminded us that there was moral badness, and there was moral blindness, and they were not the same. It was this spirit that turned hatred into forgiveness, anger into conviction, and a bitter life into a great one. He loved and honored his country even when the feeling was unreturned, and counseled others to do the same. He gave his fellow countrymen and his fellow Christians the benefit of the doubt -- believing, as he wrote, that "returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."

I remember first learning what had happened here on the fourth of April, 1968, feeling just as everyone else did back home, only perhaps even more uncertain and alarmed for my country in the darkness that was then enclosed around me and my fellow captives. In our circumstances at the time, good news from America was hard to come by. But the bad news was a different matter, and each new report of violence, rioting, and other tribulations in America was delivered without delay. The enemy had correctly calculated that the news from Memphis would deeply wound morale, and leave us worried and afraid for our country. Doubtless it boosted our captors' morale, confirming their belief that America was a lost cause, and that the future belonged to them.

Yet how differently it all turned out. And if they had been the more reflective kind, our enemies would have understood that the cause of Dr. King was bigger than any one man, and could not be stopped by force of violence. Struggle is rewarded, in God's own time. Wrongs are set right and evil is overcome. We know this to be true because it is the story of the man we honor today, and because it is the story of our country.

And yet for all of this, forty years and a world away, we look up to that balcony, we remember that night, and we are still left with a feeling of loss. Here was a young man who composed one of literature's finest testimonies to the yearning for equality and justice under law -- writing on the margins of a newspaper, in the confinement of a prison cell. Here was a preacher who endured beatings, survived bombings, suffered knifings, abuse, and ridicule, and still placed his trust in the Prince of Peace. Here was a husband and father who will stand to children in every generation as a model of Christian manhood, but never got to raise his own sons and daughters, or to share in the gift of years with his good wife.

All of this was lost on the fourth of April, 1968, and there are no consolations to balance the scale. What remains, however, is the example and witness of The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and that is forever. Thank you.