

**Remarks of Jeh C. Johnson at Martin Luther King Observance Day  
The Pentagon  
January 13, 2011 (as delivered)**

Thank you for inviting me today to be your speaker.

Before I begin I would like to acknowledge two special friends who are here today:

The first is Congressman Buck McKeon, the new chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. Mr. Chairman, thank you for taking then time to cross the river and visit the Pentagon. We know that in your new role we will be seeing a lot more of you here. One of the interesting things I have learned about this man getting to know him is that he did missionary work in San Antonio, Texas in 1958.

The second is my good friend Denis McDonough, the Deputy National Security Advisor and one of the President's closest advisors. Denis, thank you for leaving the White House to be here today.

It is appropriate, five days after the tragedy in Tuscon, that we reflect on Martin Luther King's life and legacy. The opportunity for me to speak to you about Martin Luther King is an honor and a privilege.

Martin Luther King Jr. is a 1948 graduate of Morehouse College, the renowned all-male black college in Atlanta, Georgia. Three of the biggest influences in Dr. King's life were his father, who also graduated Morehouse, the theologian Howard Thurman, who graduated from Morehouse the same year as Dr. King's father, and Benjamin Mays, the revered president of Morehouse who was Dr. King's mentor and delivered his eulogy.

I am a 1979 graduate of Morehouse College. I have been inspired and influenced by many of the same people and things that inspired and influenced Dr. King. When I arrived at Morehouse in August 1975, Dr. King had been dead 7 years, but I could still feel his presence on campus and in the city of Atlanta. I lived in "Thurman Hall" for three years. Dr. Mays was then our president emeritus, but he was still a large force on campus.

Martin Luther King Sr. came by campus once in a while to preach a sermon about how he didn't hate anybody, despite the murder of his son and his wife. I am a classmate of Martin Luther King III, my study partner and friend of almost 35 years.

Now, before I go any further, a footnote to this speech and a tribute to our boss:

One of my best and proudest moments in this job has been, and I'm sure always will be, returning to Morehouse College last May, to see one Robert M. Gates receive an honorary degree and deliver the commencement address. The night before his address, the Secretary and I visited Dr. King's gravesite on Auburn Avenue. I warned the Secretary the bar was high for oratory at Morehouse College, a Southern Baptist school that had educated Dr. King and many other Southern Baptist preachers, and students there were accustomed to barn-burning rhetoric. I told the Secretary my own commencement speaker in 1979 was Louis Farrakan, and, to be honest, I had a little difficulty envisioning the two on the same stage, delivering an address for the same event.

In delivering his commencement address, the Secretary gave an utterly flawless performance, by being utterly himself before an audience of approximately 10,000 African Americans in Atlanta, Georgia.

Afterward, I heard many compliments about the Secretary's performance that day. Here's my favorite, from my best college friend who was there (even the boss may agree this one is a little over the top):

“Jeh:

There are a lot of people wanting copies of the Secretary's commencement address. I think his speech is going to go down as one of the best in Morehouse's history. He was a big hit! You should have heard the comments that were made in the audience after his speech. I see a future President. He appeals to Black audiences. He has Bill Clinton appeal. . . . Secretary Gates comes across as a genuine good person. You can tell that he doesn't have a hang up with race. I believe he treats everyone with fairness and respect. Hell, let's make him an honorary brother!”

The very first effort to make Dr. King's birthday a holiday was actually just four days after Dr. King was assassinated in 1968, when Congressman John Conyers offered a bill to make it so. For years, the bill went nowhere.

The movement to make Dr. King's birthday a holiday gained momentum in Atlanta in the 1970s. I believe I was an eyewitness to this history.

In 1977 Martin III invited me to attend a strategy meeting hosted by his mother at their home. It was my first visit to 234 Sunset Avenue in southwest Atlanta. I sat in Mrs. King's living room, in the place where Martin Luther King had lived, and felt as if I was in the presence of royalty, in a shrine. Mrs. King was a

commanding and regal presence, but the unforgettable image I still have is of Mrs. Martin Luther King going in to her own kitchen, bringing out a tray, and serving cookies to her assembled guests of college students and local leaders.

The other vivid recollection I have of the evening was a less pleasant one.

I and others had the bright idea to bring to the meeting our political science professor, an African who was in exile in the United States from Sierra Leone. At the meeting Mrs. King explained with great passion and conviction her dream to see her husband's birthday an official government holiday. I admit thinking then that the prospect of a national holiday for Martin Luther King, alongside George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, seemed like a long-shot, but no one in the room dared disagree with Mrs. King – except my political science professor: “Mrs. King, I do not think that your husband's birthday should be a national holiday. What are black people going to do that day? They will simply barbeque.”

The mood in the room suddenly turned awkward, and Mrs. King's commanding presence went on full display: “First of all, I do not need a professor from Sierra Leone to come in to my home and lecture me. Second, who invited you?”

At that moment several of us wanted to crawl under the living room couch. Marty then walked over to his mother, whispered something in her ear—probably “mom, that's my political science professor,” the confrontation ended, and the meeting continued.

That year we organized a march to the Georgia state capitol in downtown Atlanta for a Georgia state holiday for Dr. King's birthday. And, on November 2, 1983, President Reagan, with Mrs. King at his side, signed a bill that made Martin Luther King's birthday a national holiday, effective for the first time on the third Monday in January 1986.

Thanks to the holiday we have next Monday, the name Martin Luther King is one of the most recognizable in America. Almost every major city in America has a street named for him. Almost every public school in America has his picture in a classroom. The good news is that many celebrate the day, not with a barbeque, but with a day committed to performing a public or community service.

However, we are in danger of forgetting what Martin Luther King actually challenged our nation to do, particularly in the last two years of his life.

In this year 2011, Dr. King has now been dead longer than he was ever alive, and most Americans alive today were born after April 4, 1968. For some of us, Dr. King is still a contemporary figure. For most of us, he is a figure consigned to

history, like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. And, in the 43 years since Dr. King has been dead, his legacy has morphed into one with which almost no one would disagree.

The reality is that Dr. King was divisive; to many, he was a troublemaker, to force the social change we now all celebrate. He challenged the social order of things and pushed people out of their comfort zones. When Dr. King arrived in many of the same cities for which a major street is now named for him, the Mayor and the Police Commissioner viewed his visit with dread and couldn't wait for him to leave.

For his efforts, the man we honor today alongside George Washington and Abraham Lincoln was the target of government surveillance and harassment. He was also the target of racist insults, bricks, bottles, numerous death threats, a knife in the chest in Harlem in 1958, and finally, he was murdered in Memphis in 1968.

One of the most remarkable things about this man who had such a huge impact on our country is that he lived just 39 years, and his career as a civil rights leader and an activist lasted just a little over 12 years.

I believe those 12 years can be divided into two chapters. The first phase began with the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-56 and basically ended with the Selma to Montgomery march in March 1965.

Now, some trivia about Martin Luther King Jr. from the early part of this first phase that almost no one knows; that my friend Martin III did not know about, until I shared it with him about two and a half years ago:

My grandfather, Charles S. Johnson, was a sociologist. He studied the race riots in Chicago in 1919, was active in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, joined the faculty of Fisk University in Nashville in the 1930s, and in 1947, became president of Fisk. By the 1950s, Dr. Johnson was considered one of the intellectual engines to the civil rights movement that was about to take off. In September 1956 Dr. Johnson wrote an article for the magazine section of the *New York Times* entitled "A Southern Negro's View of the South," which was a call for a national effort to rescue a race of people living as second-class citizens under a system of legalized segregation in the south.

For this statement in September 1956, my grandfather received many letters of congratulations from around the country, including one from the 27-year old pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama, which my father recently discovered in his basement:

"Dear Dr. Johnson:

This is just a note to say that I have just read your article which recently appeared in the New York Times. It is the best statement that I have read in this whole area. You evince a profound grasp of the whole subject. I am sure that the more this article is read it will bring about a greater understanding of the Negro's point of view as he struggles for first class citizenship. You combine in this article the fact finding mind of the social scientist with the moral insights of a religious prophet.

Sincerely yours,

M.L. King, Jr.  
Minister"

This letter is dated October 11, 1956, in the eleventh month of the Montgomery bus boycott that Minister King was leading.

During this first phase of his career, from 1955 to about 1965, Dr. King focused the Nation's attention on racial discrimination that could be ended by changes in law. The Montgomery bus boycott ended after a Supreme Court decision. The demonstrations in Birmingham and the March on Washington in 1963 led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Selma to Montgomery march led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 -- equal access buses, pools, lunch counters, movie theaters, jobs and the ballot box.

But, after Selma, Dr. King did not stop. He began the second phase of his career, to take on challenges that could not be remedied by a change in law.

From about 1966 to the day he died on April 4, 1968, Dr. King devoted himself principally to two very ambitious agendas: fighting poverty, and world peace. In 1966 Dr. King and his family literally moved to Chicago and rented an apartment there. He took off his preacher's suit and shoveled garbage, all to demonstrate the need for better living conditions in Chicago.

In the final few months of his life, Dr. King devoted himself to a grand plan for a Poor Peoples' March on Washington. On January 15, 1968, his last birthday alive, he presided over a meeting in the basement of his church in Atlanta and talked about a grand assembly of blacks, American Indians, organized labor and Appalachian whites that would converge on Washington later that year, to demand that the richest nation on earth address the poverty in its midst.

On the final weekend of his life, Dr. King delivered a sermon in which he reminded us that “every American is endowed by his Creator with certain inalienable rights, among those the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But if a man does not have a job or an income, he has neither life, liberty, nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists.”

In the final days of his life, Dr. King went to Memphis, Tennessee, not for a civil rights march, but to support a garbage workers’ strike for better wages and conditions.

On the final night of his life, in Memphis, Dr. King’s delivered one of his best known speeches in which he predicted his own death– his famous “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech. What is less known about the speech is that it is largely an address about economic power, and the effectiveness of an economic boycott.

But, the most controversial and difficult stand Dr. King took the final year of his life was against the war in Vietnam. Other civil rights leaders urged him to remain silent on the issue, not to alienate President Lyndon Johnson, who had been their best friend on civil rights.

Martin Luther King hated violence. He believed that violence “is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy,” and that “returning violence for violence multiples violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars . . . He also believed “an eye for eye leaves everybody blind.”

So, beginning in April 1967, one year before he died, Dr. King, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, turned this message into an impassioned plea against the war in Vietnam. Indeed, from that point on he questioned the whole rationale for war in general. From the gospel song “Down by the Riverside,” Dr. King repeated the line: “I Ain’t Gonna Study War No More.”

Today, at the Defense Department, how do we honor and respect Dr. King’s message and legacy and reconcile it with our mission? We are a nation at war, and it is the responsibility of this Department to prosecute that war.

People like to speculate about what Dr. King would believe and say if he were alive today.

I believe that if Dr. King were alive today, he would recognize that we live in a complicated world, and that our Nation’s military should not and cannot lay down its arms and leave the American people vulnerable to terrorist attack.

To our individual servicemen and women who wonder whether their mission is consistent with Martin Luther King's own message and beliefs, I refer you again to his very last speech in Memphis, the night before he died.

In it Dr. King talked about Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan on the dangerous road to Jericho. With great effect Dr. King drew a parallel between the priest and the Levite who passed by the man on the road to Jericho, beaten and robbed and in need of aid, and failed to help him, and those in Memphis in April 1968 who hesitated to help the striking sanitation workers because they feared for their own jobs, for their own comfortable positions in the Memphis community.

He criticized those who are "compassionate by proxy," and said to those in the audience in Memphis that night "The question is not, if I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me? The question is, if I do not stop the sanitation workers, what will happen to them."

In 2011, I draw the parallel to our own servicemen and women, deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere, away from the comfort of conventional jobs, their families and their homes. Those in today's volunteer Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps have made the conscious decision to travel a dangerous road, and personally stop and administer aid to those who want peace, freedom and a better place in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and in defense of the American people. Every day our servicemen and women practice that "dangerous unselfishness" Dr. King preached on April 3, 1968.

In accepting his own Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, our President recognized that, in response to an unprovoked terrorist attack, war is inevitable to secure peace, and that the role of the military is to keep peace.

The irony of next Monday is that Mrs. King's dream of a national holiday for her husband has become a reality; Dr. King's dream of a world at peace with itself has not.

I salute you all in your efforts to make our world a better place.