

The 30th Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Birthday Celebration
January 16, 2017 - Fort Coombs National Guard Armory

Mayor Van W. Johnson, Sr., Co-Keynote Speaker

A reflection of Blacks in America, from the past to the present

Thank you, thank you Ms. Hutchinson!

I also like to thank each of you for carving out time from your busy schedules to join in this year's celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior's, birthday here in the Historic City of Apalachicola. Also, my heartfelt appreciation is extended to those who have unselfishly labored for the last 30-years to provide this celebration for all to enjoy and for the opportunity presented me to co-address this year's assembly with the lovely Ms. Ocea Wynn.

Thanks to Mrs. Dolores Hayward-Croom and the Franklin County Dr. Martin Luther, King, Jr., Birthday Advisory Board, I'm deeply honored by the invitation and humbled by the occasion to stand before you to pay tribute to the legacy of one of America's most noted champions of civil and human rights.

Today, communities across this nation are likewise gathered in celebration of Dr. King's birthday, which is befittingly now a National recognized holiday. Countless of Americans just like you, are rightly honoring King's work as a renown civil-rights activist, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, a preacher and one of the most prominent and inspirational African-American leaders in all of history.

To me part of celebrating Dr. King's birthday, is to use his work and legacy as a lens to view the past, while I observe the present, and look courageously towards the future with hope.

King worked to stamp out racial injustices in America and left behind a legacy of equality, service and peace.

Yet today, some in this country are reluctant to talk about or even acknowledge the role that race has played in American history. Even though reflecting upon our history is extremely important and cannot be ignored or overlooked. Because our past influences our present and if we outright forget our past, then more than likely we will repeat it.

So, when we begin to look in earnest at America's history, insomuch as people of color are concerned. What do we actually see?

We see that from 1619 through 1865, living in the "land of the free and the home of the brave" was a hellish nightmare for people of color. A never-ending nightmare that started

with the introduction of slavery to this country, which occurred 127-years after Columbus discovered this continent.

For 246-years after that discovery, the early colonist and subsequent plantation owners in the south, prospered off the inhumane treatment of Black people, which were bought, sold and branded like cattle. Shackled, beaten, and murdered. Slavery was big business, an economic engine for the south and those who gained the most were reluctant to see it end.

However, once it had ended, the guard from the old confederacy enacted a system of Jim Crow laws, which ushered in a whole new era of racial discrimination, segregation and social injustices to keep Black folks submissive and working on the plantations as prisoners, a systematic form of slavery.

The Ku Klux Klan aided by police officers and high sheriffs enforced the Jim Crow laws passed by southern governors, senators, mayors and city councilmen.

History tells us that in the mid-1950's, Jim Crow were fully implemented throughout the south. In Montgomery, Alabama, people of color were required to give up their seats to White passengers while commuting on public transportation.

There were separate schools, drinking water fountains and separate restrooms, the same was even true here in Apalachicola at the Franklin County Courthouse, and people of color had to go to the back door of White owned restaurants to be served food.

When we look back at the history of America, insomuch as people of color are concerned. This is part of what we see!

We also see Southern states rushing to implement new laws to circumvent Brown v. Board of Education, after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down public school segregation. Eerily similar to what occurred after slavery had ended with the passing of Jim Crow laws.

We see the governor of Arkansas, sick the Arkansas National Guard on nine little Black students to prevent them from entering Little Rock Central High School.

We see 6-year-old Ruby Bridges, a Black student from New Orleans, escorted by four federal marshals past a violent mob of White citizens, so she could simply enter first grade unharmed.

When we look back on the role that race has played in the history of this country, this is the inescapable reality of what we see.

But when it was needed the most, came HOPE, in the person of a young Black man from Atlanta, named Martin, who dared us to believe that we were somebody, a civil-rights activist, an advocate for social justice, the son of a Baptist preacher. Himself a preacher by calling, some even say a modern-day prophet.

A prophet that spoke of a mountain top experience, where he foresaw an America, in which he prophetically announced he wouldn't get to see. A mountain top experience like the experience another prophet that we know of encountered on Mount Nebo.

And he spoke of a dream!

A dream that foresaw the coming together of people regardless of race or color; joined together in love as brothers and sisters, which contrast with the vision that the writer of the Book of Revelation had while in exile.

Despite the egregious acts of violence and hate perpetrated against Black people in that country. Dr. King spoke of peace, love, justice, righteousness, accountability, and humility.

His message and the non-violent movement he inspired was simple, yet profoundly powerful! His message, was what this nation needed then and more so now to make real and lasting progress.

The message pierced the conscious and soul of this country and forced it to look inward, where its true character, doctrines, religion and moral beliefs were opened and exposed to the world as hypocrisy.

The cherished foundations of freedom, the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, both regarded as America's Great Charters of Liberty, that Black people have died to help preserve, didn't include them. The hypocrisy of America in this regard was concealed behind a false sense of goodness and virtue.

Charters of Liberty, that contain the clearest, most concise and most eloquent articulation of America's most sacred belief, "that all men are created equal". But for 246-years and beyond meant absolutely nothing insomuch as Black people were concerned.

The Rev. King, a prophet, called and sent by God, spoke loud and often against the injustices perpetrated against people of color in this country, and once suggested and I quote, "It may well be that the Negro is God's instrument to save the soul of America".

Because of King's message of peace and non-violent movement, Blacks began to achieve more genuine progress toward racial equality in America. Which led to the rise of such notable Black leaders as Thurgood Marshall, who as a lawyer argued the historic case, *Brown v. Board of Education* before the U.S. Supreme Court that integrated public schools and he was the first African-American justice to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, and then there was Charles Hamilton Houston, who was one of the nation's greatest legal strategists, sometimes referred to as "The Man Who Killed Jim Crow", and Carter G. Woodson, known as the "Father of Black History," who's responsible for documenting and sharing the history of Black's in this country, just to name a few.

Forty-five years after King's dream and mountain top experience, against all odds this country elected Barack Obama, the first African-American to serve as President of the United States. Once again there was HOPE in America, followed by CHANGE. HOPE that the dream of Dr. King, long-held by people of color, had finally come to fruition and that CHANGE was on the horizon for all Americans regardless of race, color or creed.

Unfortunately, however! The mere idea of HOPE and CHANGE, once again stirred up the dark side of America. Some say they didn't like the policies of HOPE and CHANGE, but before HOPE and CHANGE could initiate one single policy, there was a plot afoot to limit HOPE and CHANGE to one term. Others said that HOPE and CHANGE was destroying America, but after 8-years, America is still intact.

HOPE and CHANGE agitated those with a false sense of superiority and unyielding privilege, those who have yet to realize that God has no respect of person, and that all men are created in His image.

At every turn, it seemed as if HOPE and CHANGE were summarily discounted and disrespected, but held steadfast to grace and dignity, which stirred some even more.

Thus, we once again find ourselves reckoning with the reality that in 21st Century America, some have eagerly turned back to wallow in the trough of racial injustice and despair.

Words like public or affordable that precede words like housing and health care have now become code words for Black, and the guaranteed right to due process, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are only for the privileged, and just like it was in the days of old, Black lives don't seem to matter, even though all lives are precious in the sight of God, He gives life and only He alone can rightly take it away.

Now there's a growing belief held by many, that building WALLS are better than building bridges and that hate is better than love.

But I share with each of you today, that Dr. King's messages of peace, love, and justice are just as relevant today as they were yesterday, and that "hate still cannot drive out hate; only love can", still ring true.

King's dream was strikingly similar to John's vision while in exile on the Island of Patmos. Both men saw a state of harmony between God and His people. People gathered up from different nations of the world, of all races and colors, joined and bound together in love, praising and worshiping the Creator of all things, the One True God.

The only WALLS that John saw, had doors that were guarded by the heavenly host, to keep hate out.

The reality is that apart from God, King's dream of racial harmony cannot exist in America or any place else on earth as for as that matters.

So, as we begin to realize that our hope is eternal, while we yet occupy these earthly vessels. All of us, working hand-in-hand together, both Black people and White people must remain vigilant, and demand that the leaders of this country live up to America's most sacred creed, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".

In the meantime, to those that have suddenly developed this burning desire to "Make America Great Again". Can first start by loving God as well as their neighbors, and by humbling themselves before God, while seeking His face and that when they stop sinning and start treating others, as they want to be treated. Then and only then, will America be great!

Thank you, have a blessed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday and may God continue to bless the City of Apalachicola and the United States of America.

All Rights Reserved!