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A Return, Not A Rejection: Celebrating Dr. King's Vision

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On August 28, 1963, against the backdrop of the Lincoln Memorial, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. forever imprinted the words “I have a dream” on America’s memory. Recalling the Declaration of Independence’s vision for a color-blind society, Dr. King offered his vision of a hopeful future that embraced the principles whose language had been declared nearly 200 years before.

While Dr. King’s words were a chastisement of America’s failure to live up to the principles of its founding declaration, they were simultaneously a call to embrace those very principles. Indeed, shadowed by the Great Emancipator, Dr. King admonished the United States not to abandon its founding principles but to return to them.

Looking beyond the injustices that had occurred—and those that were still occurring—Dr. King recalled Thomas Jefferson’s assertion in the Declaration of Independence that nature and nature’s God are the source of rights that give significant value to everyone.

As ill-practiced as America’s past ideals had often been, Dr. King did not issue a call to remake America but rather to remember and practice what America should have been all along. “One day,” he said, “this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”



While in many ways we have made significant progress nearly 60 years later, in many other ways we still fall short of our founding creed. The temptation is to conclude the creed is flawed and another must be constructed. But Dr. King believed differently. Instead of rejecting America’s past ideals, he called his listeners to embody the principles that birthed a new nation.

Dr. King believed the foundation of the equality he envisioned remained true. Building on it, however, would require us to hold ourselves to a higher standard than historically had been the case.

Among the most quoted portions of Dr. King's speech relates to his belief in equality of rights before the law: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." He envisioned a society that rewarded individuals for their integrity, abilities, and work ethic. A society where outcomes depended on each individual, but rights were equal for all before the law.

Dr. King's message was clear and simple: We needed to return to the principles of our founding. These principles had already proven a capable guide. President Abraham Lincoln, for example, used them to support his anti-slavery worldview. As Matthew Spalding, Dean at Hillsdale College's Washington, DC campus, once wrote:

Abraham Lincoln held that slavery violated the Declaration of Independence and recalled the nation to the Founders' constitution and the principles it enshrined in order to place slavery once again on 'the road to ultimate extinction.' He maintained that the Constitution was made to secure the principles proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, and that those principles and the Constitution, properly understood, were perfectly compatible. His great achievement, in probably the most trying epoch of our history, was to preserve our constitutional republic while restoring its dedication to the timeless principles of liberty, 'applicable to all men and all times,' that form the central idea of America.

Just as Lincoln continually brought his listeners back to the founding era to expose and battle the gross injustice of his time—and one of the worst atrocities in American history—so, too, did the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his iconic speech.

A century and a half after President Lincoln and a half century after Dr. King, it remains for us to continue their vision to live out the beliefs of the Declaration of Independence. To commit ourselves not to reject our founding principles upholding inalienable rights and equality for all—but, rather, to return to them. Of course, there's no better way to return to them than to teach them. Teach them at the primary and secondary level. Teach them at the higher education level. And yes, teach them even to our children at home.

To honor Dr. King's legacy during this 33rd MLK Day, let's not only celebrate his vision, but fulfill it.

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