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Martin Luther King Day
Georgia Nugent Remarks
January 18, 2021

When the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, I was a high school student. I remember vividly the news and the shock. Almost 20 years later, our country established a national holiday to recognize this American reformer and patriot. It wasn't until 2000 that all states recognized the holiday.

Today, we gather, virtually, to join in appreciation of Martin Luther King's life and to recommit to the ideals he espoused and worked for. This is not easy in our current environment. As recently as a year ago, when we held this event, it seemed reasonable to speak of progress, to speak of hope. And we must still speak of hope. But events of the last year have, for many of us, altered our understanding of progress in America.

We can no longer escape the fact that racism is not an aberration, a personal shortcoming (though it may be that). More importantly, it is, in fact, systemic, affecting the opportunities and the outcomes for people of color across all realms: for example: housing, employment, healthcare, and education. The reality of disparities has been brought into even higher relief by the COVID pandemic. We are not, by any means, the equitable society that King imagined, dreamt of, worked for.

Reverend King was a realist. Even though he could not know how his life would be cut short, he knew—and said—that his dream of equality in America would not be achieved in his lifetime. It will not be achieved in my lifetime. But we need to continue to work, with a new urgency reinvigorated by the disparities—and the despair—we see around us.

We need to band together and work in the hope that in the lifetime of our students, of our children, that dream can be realized.

After the violence in Washington, many said, “We’re better than this. This is not who we are.” I can’t subscribe to that thought. Often, on a college campus, a student who has committed some infraction will say, “This is not who I am.” My response to that is always the same: You took that action, so this IS who you are. Everyone of my generation, as I said a moment ago, remembers where they were when Martin Luther King was shot. When John Kennedy was shot. When Bobby Kennedy was shot. This is who we are. But it is not who we aspire to be, it is not what dreamers like Martin Luther King can imagine America to be.

We must continue to work together in hope, to realize that dream. And so we set aside this day, as a time for us to come together in commemoration, yes. But this is not just a day to honor the memory of Martin Luther King. It is a time to re-commit to what he stood for. And we will do that, in part, through making a space in our calendar and in our lives, to listen, to learn from one another, and to hear the call of what Abraham Lincoln termed, “the better angels of our nature.”