

MLK50 Symposium: Where Do We Go From Here? Keynote Address

THE HONORABLE ERIC H. HOLDER, JR.^{*+}

Thank you. Good afternoon, everybody. I want to thank President Rudd,¹ Dean Letsou,² and President Freeman³ for inviting me here today. Louise,⁴ it's always good to see you—and you bring

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+ *Editor's Note:* This is an edited transcript of Eric Holder's keynote address at the *MLK50 Symposium: Where Do We Go From Here?* This luncheon occurred during the Symposium, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death. The University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law and The National Civil Rights Museum hosted the event in downtown Memphis on April 2, 2018. To watch the video from this event, see uofmemphisvideos, *MLK 50 – Keynote Luncheon*, YOUTUBE (Apr. 2, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-kA4pqXcgg>.

1. M. David Rudd is the President of The University of Memphis. *About the President M. David Rudd*, U. MEM., <http://www.memphis.edu/presweb/about/index.php> (last visited Oct. 27, 2018).

2. At the time of the Symposium, Peter V. Letsou served as the Dean of The University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law. *Peter V. Letsou*, U. MEM., <http://www.memphis.edu/law/faculty-staff/peter-letsou.php> (last visited Oct. 27, 2018).

3. Terri Lee Freeman is the President of The National Civil Rights Museum. *Board of Directors*, NAT'L C.R. MUSEUM, <https://www.civilrightsmuseum.org/board-of-directors> (last visited Oct. 27, 2018).

4. Louise is married to Senator Doug Jones. *Meet Doug Jones*, DOUG JONES U.S. SENATE, <https://dougjones.com/doug/> (last visited Nov. 19, 2018).

Doug with you, of course. Thank you, Senator Doug Jones,⁵ for your kind words and warm welcome but also for your service to our country. Now as a person who has worked with you for over twenty years, I know the depth of your commitment and the extent of your achievements. You have too often been a lonely voice in the fight for justice, but you've always prevailed in courtrooms and at ballot boxes. Yours is now a welcome presence in Washington, D.C., at this trying time for our nation; I'm proud to call you a good colleague and a treasured friend.

It is a privilege to be with you all today, with so many distinguished faculty members, elected officials, committed activists, as well as future leaders. As always, it's good to be here in Memphis. I love this City. I love its energy. I love its sense of possibility—the feeling that, as Dr. King once described it, that “[s]omething is happening in Memphis.”⁶ Now I also deeply admire this City's ability to showcase its extraordinary progress without glossing over a heartrending past. Now like so much of our nation, Memphis has been defined by great achievement but also by great tragedy. From the brave Memphis State Eight, the first African-American students to set foot on what was then the Memphis State campus in 1959,⁷ to last year's successful Take 'Em Down 901 initiative that toppled two long-standing Confederate memorials,⁸ the City's forward movement, I think, is evident. Its healing is evident, and yet the scars of our past can still be seen and felt not only in this City but in our nation as well.

Now today we gather to commemorate the deepest of wounds—the passing of a man but not the death of a dream—the senseless murder of our nation's most committed, most courageous, and most consequential drum major for justice—Dr. Martin Luther

5. See *About Doug*, DOUG JONES SENATOR FOR ALA., <https://www.jones.senate.gov/about> (last visited Oct. 27, 2018).

6. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *I See the Promised Land*, in *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS AND SPEECHES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.* 279, 279 (James Melvin Washington ed., 1986).

7. Raven Copeland, *Memphis State Eight's Legacy Lives on at the U of M*, DAILY HELMSMAN (Feb. 8, 2018), http://www.dailyhelmsman.com/news/memphis-state-eight-s-legacy-lives-on-at-the-u/article_eb7d7a04-0d30-11e8-ad2e-772ad1d61d2d.html.

8. *The Confederacy Falls in Memphis*, MLK50: JUST. THROUGH JOURNALISM, <https://mlk50.com/source-memphis-confederate-monuments-to-come-down-wednesday-4b35ed1de8a2> (last visited Oct. 27, 2018).

King, Jr. But on this day, we must also commit ourselves to making real the dream that animated his too short life. For half a century now, the anniversaries of Dr. King's birth and death have provided important opportunities not only to celebrate and reflect upon his extraordinary life but to consider where we now are as a nation, to take stock of our progress, to take responsibility for the work that remains before us, and to rededicate ourselves to the dream of racial, social, and economic justice that is Dr. King's living legacy.

But we must also confront the truth about him. In his life, Dr. King forced America to face what he termed the three evils: racism, poverty, and war. Though revered now, that singular focus on those evils ultimately made him an unpopular figure. This is the truth. By 1966, a Gallup poll found that almost two-thirds of Americans had an unfavorable opinion of Dr. King.⁹ As he emphasized his opposition to war and spread the focus of his work outside the South, he became a threatening, polarizing, and disliked figure.

Now I was too young to realize when I first heard of his assassination, in that moment of grief and heartbreak, how powerfully his spirit would live on. I did not yet understand that no act of violence or hate nor any temporal disfavor was strong enough to hold back the movement that Dr. King had launched or deny the dream that he had set in motion. I could not have imagined how passionately his many partners and supporters—some not yet born—but especially his remarkable wife Coretta Scott King and the living, direct heir John Lewis would carry his work forward. And I could never have predicted how the trail that he blazed in, again, his too-short life—he was only thirty-nine years old, thirty-nine at the time of his death—how that would impact my own life. There is a direct line from his leadership on the front lines of the struggle to my service many decades later as our nation's first African American Attorney General and the election of our nation's first African American president. We would not have had the opportunity to serve in those positions without the sacrifices and vision of Dr. King.

9. Frank Newport, *Martin Luther King Jr.: Revered More After Death Than Before*, GALLUP (Jan. 16, 2006), <http://news.gallup.com/poll/20920/martin-luther-king-jr-revered-more-after-death-than-before.aspx> (“[I]n 1966—the last Gallup measure of King using this scalometer procedure [a procedure which asked the public to rate him on +5 to -5 e procedure]—it was 32% positive and 63% negative.”).

I wish that Dr. King could be with us here so that he could see how the new country—the new country—that he helped to create has improved so much. I wish he could see how the system of American apartheid that he fought against has been legally dismantled. I wish he could see how people of all races treasure the memorial that stands in his honor at our National Mall. Above all though, I wish he could see how effectively concerned women, LGBTQ Americans, still-distressed minority communities, and now students and citizens who have seen enough of gun violence have copied Dr. King’s tactics, and how, in acts of King-inspired non-violent protest, they have launched their own movements calling for and marching for fairness, opportunity, and justice.

Now, despite the extraordinary progress that has shaped the last five decades and transformed our entire society, we are still marching. We are still striving. And we are still calling on our nation’s leaders to act with a sense of justice, compassion, and common humanity because the unfortunate fact is that, in 2018, America’s long struggle to overcome injustice, to eliminate disparities, and to eradicate violence has not yet ended. And the age of bullies and bigots is not fully behind us. Bull Connor and Jim Clark are gone but parts of their legacy endure. In my travels across this great nation, I often hear from people, especially young people, who tell me that they feel lost in their own country, unsure of where they belong, and fearful that America’s too-longstanding divisions are threatening to tear our nation apart.

This is indeed a time of challenge and of consequence, but Dr. King was no stranger to such moments. Throughout his life and most famously on the eve of his death as he delivered the seminal Mountaintop speech that would be his final sermon, Reverend King asked himself when, if given the choice of any period in time, he would choose to be alive.¹⁰ Now, the question began with a journey through the ages and, at each stop, whether at Mount Olympus or ancient Rome, Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation or Roosevelt’s call to fear only fear itself, Dr. King asked himself what year would he choose to experience and help shape; and, his own, he ultimately decided.¹¹ Happiness, he explained, comes from embracing

10. KING, *supra* note 6, at 279.

11. *Id.* at 279–80.

the blessings and burdens of destiny and the opportunities that arise in difficult times.¹² “[O]nly when it is dark enough,” Dr. King said, “can you see the stars,”¹³ but today, once again, it is dark enough.

We have not yet reached the Promised Land, but today, once more, we can see the stars. We see them in the courage and commitment of ordinary people nationwide—Americans of all ages, races, and backgrounds who refuse to give into fear and frustration, who resist shameful attempts to exploit and divide the American people, and who are keeping up the fight for the safety and civil rights of all. We see them in people who take to the streets and to the offices of their elected leaders. We see them in the examples of those who, in recent weeks in the wake of senseless tragedy, have found their voices in calling for solutions that respect our forbearers, our law enforcement community, and our legal system while prioritizing our most precious resource: our children.

It is times like these when the power of Dr. King’s example and his enduring words are brought into stark focus, and one of the most important lessons he left is that it is necessary—it is necessary—to be indignant and to be impatient so that it impels us to take action. The fact that Dr. King’s strength was rooted in frustration, just as much as in faith, is really a great comfort to me. Now, I say that because as proud as I am of our country—my country—and as grateful as I feel for the progress that we’ve made and the opportunities the civil rights movement has made available to me, the truth is, like Dr. King, I am dissatisfied. I am dissatisfied that every day in America forty-six children and teenagers are shot. I am dissatisfied that in our nation’s lowest-income neighborhoods only four percent of black children have a father at home, and that one in five of the black boys born in these neighborhoods end up in our criminal justice system. I am dissatisfied that economic progress remains uneven, that educational opportunity is far from uniform, and that, in the face of these facts, simply acknowledging that black lives matter too is somehow controversial. I’m dissatisfied that I’ve had to have the talk with my then teenage son—the conversation that so many black families in America have had in order to protect their children—about how to safely interact with law enforcement. But, as the brother of a retired

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

police officer and as someone who, with Doug, spent his career working hand-in-hand with the men and women of law enforcement, I'm also dissatisfied that unpunished, bad actions by a few have sown widespread mistrust for the dedicated, honorable men and women who wear the badge. I'm also dissatisfied that too many women; Latinos; Asian Americans; Native Americans; lesbian, gay, and transgender Americans; and people with disabilities still yearn for equal opportunity and fair treatment.

And I am dissatisfied that more than half a century after Dr. King helped pass the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965 far too many Americans find it hard to get the right to vote and the assurance that one's vote is counted fairly. All of this remains under siege. To me, this question of voting is the chief civil rights issue of our time. And what's striking is that, in that regard, our nation is not as different as it should be from the America that existed during the life of Dr. King. The Selma March was about the right to vote.¹⁴ The deaths of three civil rights workers in Mississippi in 1964 was about the right to vote.¹⁵ The Voting Rights Act of 1965 has justifiably been called the crown jewel of the civil rights movement.¹⁶ As Dr. King so often pointed out, in this great country, the ability of all eligible citizens to participate in and to have an equal voice in the work of government is not a privilege, it is a right. The ability to vote is not a privilege. It is a right and, as President Lyndon B. Johnson said, "[t]he vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice."¹⁷ Our nation's policies are determined by those who serve in elected office, and we must make certain that these representatives accurately reflect the choices of the American electorate. Yet in many communities today, our political system is far from fair. It's

14. *Selma to Montgomery March*, HIST., <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/selma-montgomery-march> (last visited Nov. 7, 2018).

15. *Mississippi Burning*, FBI, <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/mississippi-burning> (last visited Nov. 7, 2018).

16. Howell Raines, *Voting Rights Act Signed by Reagan*, N.Y. TIMES, June 30, 1982, at A16, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/30/us/voting-rights-act-signed-by-reagan.html>.

17. Lyndon B. Johnson, Remarks in the Capitol Rotunda at the Signing of the Voting Rights Act (Aug. 6, 1965), in AM. PRESIDENCY PROJECT, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-capitol-rotunda-the-signing-the-voting-rights-act> (last visited Oct. 27, 2018).

been undermined by spurious and outright false claims of widespread voter fraud and by acts of voter suppression. And it's been rigged by racial and partisan gerrymandering, and that's why I helped to launch, and am proud to chair, the National Democratic Redistricting Committee.¹⁸ Now the National Democratic Redistricting Committee is working to make our democracy more representative, and we're attacking this problem from every angle. We're working to rebuild a system where citizens choose their representatives and dismantle an unjust status quo where politicians are picking their voters. We're working to ensure that voting maps are drawn fairly and that the integrity of the Voting Rights Act is upheld. We're working to erase laws that make the casting of a ballot a function of your age, your ethnicity, or your party and not your connection to this nation, and we need your help.

But joining this fight is just one of the many ways that you can honor Dr. King's legacy and help to shape America's future. It is time for each of us—it is time for everybody—to ask as Dr. King so famously did: “Where do we go from here?”¹⁹ What more can we do as individuals and as a society to help realize Dr. King's vision of racial and social equality? How can we lift up the values that were at the heart of his sermons, the root of his actions, the core of his character, and the center of his life? Most importantly, how can we heal this divided nation as he sought to do and bring our fellow citizens together in the name of tolerance, nonviolence, compassion, love, and, above all, justice? It is only by coming together that we can write the next great chapter of America's story. Dr. King is often quoted as saying that “the arc of the moral universe is long, [and] it bends toward justice.”²⁰ Well, that's true but that's only because caring, committed people put their hands on that arc and pull it towards justice, and, so, it must be again.

So today let us not merely reflect upon our past, let's pledge our best efforts to protect the advances that we have inherited and make real the legacy that's been entrusted to each of us. That is our

18. *About the NDRC*, NAT'L DEMOCRATIC REDISTRICTING COMMITTEE, <https://democraticredistricting.com/about/> (last visited Nov. 7, 2018).

19. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *Where Do We Go from Here?*, in *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE*, *supra* note 6, at 245, 245.

20. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience*, in *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE*, *supra* note 6, at 43, 52.

charge, and this is our moment. As easy as it is, we must not look back toward a past that was comforting to too few and unjust to too many. That is not how we make America great. We must do the difficult things and that means embracing the uncertainties of the future and then shaping that future in the way that truly great American leaders always have. We must not give in to irrational fear and manufactured division but instead embrace needed trust and national unity. So let us rise to the challenge of our time, and, in the spirit of Dr. King, let us signal to the world that in America today, the pursuit of a more perfect Union lives on, the march toward the Promised Land goes on, and the belief not only that we shall overcome but that we will truly come together as one nation continues to push us forward. May God continue to bless our journey. May God continue to bless this wonderful City. And may God continue to bless the United States of America. Thank you.

QUESTION ONE: How confident are you that the movement started by the Parkland, Florida students²¹ will be successful in moving various leadership to where they feel the country should be in regards to gun control specifically?

MR. HOLDER: Well, I think that's a very interesting question. I'm actually—I don't know if you all watch, I was on the Bill Maher Show, I guess two weeks or so ago with two of the young people from Parkland; and I was struck by how precocious they almost are, by the presence they have, by their ability to convey in a very sincere and effective way the feelings that they have. I think that these young people, these kids, are going to be successful in ways that we adults have not. My concern is that we not have a moment but that we have a movement, and I think that they are committed, and I think that the question will be "who among us will join with them in this fight for just sane gun control laws?" And as I said in my remarks, if we want to honor Dr. King's legacy, I think we should all find an issue, a cause that we identify ourselves with and working with these young people in Parkland—but these young people really all around the country—is a place where I think that we as adults could justifiably spend a good portion of our time.

21. *March for Our Lives Highlights: Students Protesting Guns Say 'Enough Is Enough,'* N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 24, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/24/us/march-for-our-lives.html>.

QUESTION TWO: How does the work of Dr. King continue to impact your vision for the country today and the work that you do?

MR. HOLDER: Well, I think that Dr. King's words are timeless. 1968 was fifty years ago. It seems like only an instant to me in some ways, and yet what he said during the fifties and what he did in the fifties and sixties is as relevant today as it was then. I think it certainly had an impact on me as a young man. It certainly helped shape my view of what I should do as a public servant. It impacts me today as just a citizen of the United States, and that's what all of you are—citizens who have enormous amounts of power. I don't think that we should allow ourselves to live in a society where we think that we simply vote, which is important—which is extremely important—and then we leave for our elected officials the running of this country. As American citizens, we have a responsibility, a duty, and we have the power to shape the nation that we live in and the policies that this nation takes. If you remember after the inauguration of President Trump, the march the day after, that Women's March²² and how powerful that was, and remember how powerful it was to see citizens going into offices of congressmen and senators as consideration was being given to dismantling Obamacare. That showed real citizen power, and this last march that we saw in Washington—that young people's march²³—again, shows citizen power, and, from that citizen power, I think can come meaningful change. So, it's not only a question of how my life has been impacted by Dr. King and my commitment to certain things. The question is how has it impacted your lives and the commitments that you're going to make to making this nation better and more just. You do have that power, and I do think that as American citizens you also have that responsibility.

QUESTION THREE: How do you feel you changed the narrative for African Americans?

MR. HOLDER: I think I have to be pretty humble here because I think that I'm proud of the work that I did with President Obama. I think that we made a positive contribution—but the work that we did, we did standing on the shoulders of giants. People who came before us, some of whom are well-known to us—Dr. King, John

22. *The March*, WOMEN'S MARCH, <https://www.womensmarch.com/march/> (last visited Nov. 7, 2018).

23. *March for Our Lives Highlights: Students Protesting Guns Say 'Enough Is Enough,' supra* note 21.

Lewis, Coretta Scott King as I mentioned—but many of whom who are unknown to us, people who did seemingly small things but really significant things, people who labored too long in fields, people who suffered through Jim Crow, people who—I think about my father—enlisted in the United States Army at the age of forty-one, forty-two, during World War II and while in uniform was discriminated against. He was born and raised in Barbados, came to New York, and then went south for the first time in uniform and was discriminated against in North Carolina and then out in Oklahoma. And, I think about the love that man had for this country and how that love for this country and the little things that he did had an impact on the course, the narrative, for African Americans. So, I think about them. I think about what President Obama and I attempted to do—what Doug Jones did and how he impacted that narrative—but, again, I get back to what are you all going to do, you know? What are you going to do to impact, not only the narrative for African Americans, but for all Americans? What are you going to do to make sure that this country lives up to its founding documents? The possibility for positive change is there, but it is not promised. Positive change doesn't happen simply because of the turning of the calendar. It happens because people commit themselves. People persevere when there are bad times. People work with other people. We have that capacity within ourselves to make that narrative better for all Americans, so I'd like to think that I helped to have an impact on the narrative for African Americans and, maybe, all Americans, but as I said, I stand on the shoulders of people far greater than me.

I want to thank you all so much for your hospitality. I look forward to working with all of you in some form or fashion as concerned citizens in making this country better. We can do that. We can do that. We should be optimistic about our future. Think about those young people who marched just last week. Think of the women who came out, as I said, after the inauguration. There are hundreds of millions of us who care about this nation. It means we've got to vote. It means we've got to work, but, if we stay together, if we stay committed, we can make positive change a reality for this great nation. I look forward, as I said, to working with all of you in that quest. Thanks very much.