

# MLK50 Symposium: Where Do We Go From Here? Introduction to the Keynote Address

SENATOR DOUG JONES<sup>\*+</sup>

Thank you, thank you Dean Letsou,<sup>1</sup> and thank you so much, Dr. Rudd.<sup>2</sup> Thank you for having me here, it's an absolute delight for my wife, Louise, and I to be here. As you can imagine, the last ten months or so have been a little bit busy for us. But thanks to her, my running mate, as I refer to my wife, we're still running. I'm aware it's a daily grind. But it's a lot of fun for us, and I appreciate all the help. And I know I got a ton of help out of the State of Tennessee, and I appreciate everything that came our way south to Alabama so that we could prevail on December 12, which, as you might have

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+ *Editor's Note:* This is an edited transcript of Senator Doug Jones's introductory remarks at the *MLK50 Symposium: Where Do We Go From Here?* keynote luncheon. 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. 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).

2. 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).

heard, was our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, so it's going to be hard to top that one, I can tell you that.

Also, I want to mention a couple of things before I make a couple of remarks. I do want to mention a couple of old friends who are here today. One is also a former United States Attorney, Mike Cody. Mike is out there somewhere, I can hardly see anybody, but Mike is one of my heroes. Mike truly is one of my heroes and has some amazing stories. And then another old friend, who was on one of your panels today, who happens to be here today, Roy Austin. Roy is also an old friend. And what you may not know about Roy is that when I first became a United States Attorney in 1997, Roy Austin was one of two lawyers at the Department of Justice that had been assigned to work on the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing case, and for a couple of years before I kind of took over everything as United States Attorney, Roy provided the background that helped us. So, please thank Roy Austin for all the work he did on getting those convictions. And I would be remiss if I let go the fact that I hope I'm here with a couple of future colleagues, Mike Espy from Mississippi and Phil Bredesen from here in Tennessee, that I hope will join me in the Senate come next fall.

We have been brought here to celebrate and honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as we mark the fiftieth anniversary of his assassination. This conference provides each and every one of us an opportunity to reflect on Dr. King's legacy and what it means to each one of us. You've heard about my role in the Sixteenth Street bombing cases. December 12 of this year was one of the highlights of my life, but, I'll tell you in all candor, I don't think that it compares to listening to two jury foremen announce guilty verdicts of two former Klansmen for the death of those four young girls.<sup>3</sup> It was a remarkable journey from a kid that grew up in Fairfield all the way to the University of Alabama and then working in the Senate and then being able to handle that case, getting the support of the Attorney General of the United States Janet Reno and her top deputy Eric Holder, who worked with me a lot on that case, as well as the Eric Rudolph case. It was a remarkable time. But with the guilty verdicts that we

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3. See Chelsey Parrott-Sheffer, *16th Street Baptist Church Bombing*, ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA, <https://www.britannica.com/event/16th-Street-Baptist-Church-bombing> (last updated Sept. 8, 2018).

achieved in those cases, I think in many ways represents how far Alabama, the South, and our nation has come in the past fifty years. Those verdicts couldn't have happened fifty years ago. They just would've never happened. But we had a diverse jury of all ages—men and women, black and white—that found justice finally after so many years. And in the aftermath of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Dr. King delivered the eulogy for three of the girls, pointing out that their deaths say to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American Dream.<sup>4</sup> To me, that line contains an essential core of his legacy, confronting the challenges in the face of seemingly unsurmountable odds, tragedy, and setbacks.

Fifty years later, his influence can be seen in all of our lives, every day. You see it in the kinds of schools our children attend, where we eat, where we gather, and where we work. His influence has been immeasurable. But as we all know too well, Dr. King's dream has not been fully realized. And in many respects, it seems that we have been backsliding. We've been sliding a little back on voting rights and access to the ballot box. We've been sliding backward in the area of criminal justice reform. We seem to be sliding backward by empowering white supremacists and white nationalists from one end of this country to the other. We have been sliding backwards in so many ways in our society. But as we gather today and throughout this week, it's imperative to acknowledge that together, as a group and individually, each one of us has the responsibility to continue to fight for the American Dream, to honor Dr. King's legacy by working every day to ensure that our nation lives up to its creed of dignity, respect, equality, and justice. You know, there are many great men and women who stood with Dr. King in his fight for equality and justice. These men and women and Dr. King were standing up for what is the best of the American Dream. And there have been many people that have followed, many leaders that have followed Dr. King to carry on that legacy. But I don't think anyone embodies that spirit more than my friend Eric Holder, a man who has

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4. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *Eulogy for the Martyred Children*, in *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS AND SPEECHES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.* 221–23 (James Melvin Washington ed., 1986).

done so much in service to the United States. His life story is truly the American Dream.

Born in 1951 in New York City to an immigrant father and a second-generation immigrant mother, Eric graduated from a high school for gifted students. He attended college and law school at Columbia University. In 1976, following law school, he got a job with the Department of Justice, working as part of the Attorney General's Honor's Program. In 1988, he was nominated by former President Ronald Reagan to become an associate judge of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia. He presided over hundreds of civil and criminal trials, and for those of us who have been in the arena of trials, whether you were a trial lawyer or a judge, there's nothing that gives you the experience of having to handle each one of those, to appear in court, to see the pros, the cons, the good, the bad, and the ugly of how justice can be meted out every day. He did such a wonderful job that Eric was then nominated by President Bill Clinton to serve as the United States Attorney for the District of Columbia in 1993. As such, he was the first African American to hold that position, and during his four-year term he created domestic violence units and community prosecutions projects and rose to the top in the Department of Justice and United States Attorney ranks; such that in 1997, shortly before I became the United States Attorney in Birmingham, he became the first African American selected to the position of Deputy Attorney General of the United States, the number-two person in the Department of Justice. In doing that, he became the highest-ranking African American in law enforcement in the history of the United States.

But he didn't stop there. After Barack Obama's election, he was appointed and confirmed as the eighty-second United States Attorney General in 2009, making him the first African American Attorney General in history. Eric's tenure was marked by successful efforts in advancing civil rights issues, like voting rights and racial profiling. He led an investigation into the police department in Ferguson, Missouri, and other police departments who had let their guard down when it came to protecting all members of society. He led efforts in criminal justice reform, knowing that mass incarceration has been jailing a generation of black men in this country, and he used his platform to call for a more open discussion about race and racial dis-

crimination in America. I have to say that one of Eric's proudest moments, and we did work closely, but one of his highest achievements was marrying an Alabama girl. Sharon, his wife, could not make it today. For those of you that do not know this, Sharon Malone Holder, from Mobile, Alabama, her sister Vivian was one of the two students blocked at the "Stand In The Schoolhouse Door" by Governor George Wallace in 1963.<sup>5</sup> So Sharon, like Eric, has a history with the civil rights movement.

So, before I turn it over to the Attorney General, I'd like to leave you with one last quote from Dr. King's eulogy to those four girls killed in the church bombing, as we reflect on his life and legacy. He said: "Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to a more lofty significance."<sup>6</sup> My great friend, Eric Holder, has worked tirelessly to continue the work of Dr. King, to do all that he can following the comma that marked Dr. King's death, and in doing so, he has not only carried on the legacy of Dr. King, he has established a historic legacy of his own. We should all aspire to reach the lofty significance and goals in the mountaintop like these two great men have. It is with a great pleasure that I present to you, my friend, the eighty-second Attorney General of the United States, the Honorable Eric Holder.

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5. See Robert Andrew Dunn, *Stand in the Schoolhouse Door*, ENCYCLOPEDIA ALA., <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1872> (last visited Oct. 27, 2018).

6. KING, *supra* note 4, at 222.