

Barack Obama's Inauguration and the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

This is a historic week for our nation. On Monday, we celebrated the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. On Tuesday, we witnessed the inauguration of Barack Obama as our country's 44th President.

I recently took the oath of office as our new State Representative. The Massachusetts legislature has been in existence since the 17th century, well before the American colonies became a free and independent nation. I swore to uphold our state constitution which is the oldest written constitution still in use today, and which heavily influenced the United States constitution. It was written by John Adams, Sam Adams, and James Bowdoin and ratified by the people of Massachusetts in 1780.

In the very first article of our constitution, they wrote, "All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights."

These words represent the great promise of our state and our nation upon its founding. The civil rights movement that Dr. King led demanded nothing more and nothing less than the fulfillment of this centuries old promise.

Yet, these words were written during the time of slavery. It was not until three years later that Massachusetts became the first state to abolish slavery and to set the country on a path that would eventually lead to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the end of slavery in this country. Massachusetts was also the first state to recruit, train, and arm a black regiment, the famous 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. We can all be proud that the citizens of our state helped lead the way forward.

There is a particular pride for me in being a Massachusetts citizen and now serving in the Massachusetts legislature. As some of you may know, I was born in South Africa. When I was growing up there, the country was under apartheid, a terribly oppressive form of racial segregation. Apartheid stripped blacks of their citizenship, restricted their voting rights, and segregated education, health care and other public services. Black people suffered daily humiliations and struggles, large and small. My family left South Africa in 1980 and came to the United States because my parents wanted to raise their children in a society that treats all people with respect and dignity regardless of the color of their skin.

South Africa has changed in profound ways since Nelson Mandela helped to bring about the peaceful end of apartheid in 1994.

And, so too has our country in the years since the death of Dr. King. What would he say if he were alive today to see the inauguration of our nation's first black President? With what words would he inspire us to continue to strive for true and lasting equality for

all people, regardless of their race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or any other basis for unfair discrimination ?

Perhaps we can guess by quoting his words from 40 years ago: "Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle. And so we must straighten our backs and work for our freedom. A man can't ride you unless your back is bent."

Barack Obama's election is a great and inspiring milestone in the struggle for equality and justice in our country. His election demonstrates the enduring power of our founding principles and values and our nation's ability to constantly evolve and change for the better.

But we cannot become complacent in the struggle to realize Dr. King's dream. Too many children lack access to a quality education that can open doors to opportunity. Too many people lack access to affordable healthcare and so are left one illness or accident away from disaster. And, too many people, particularly African-Americans, do not receive fair treatment at the hands of our justice system. For these people change is not inevitable. We must straighten our backs to face these challenges together with our new President.

Let me conclude with a few words -- originally spoken by Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister who lived in Boston in the 1800s -- that both Martin Luther King and Barack Obama have quoted: "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice ."

Let us each do our own small part in our lives to bend that arc.

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