

MLK, Jr. Day (January 19, 2025) – Kailua Kona

Why We Honor Martin Luther King, Jr.

By Bob Yuhnke

Aloha, Friends. I've been invited to share my experience 60 years ago of organizing 33 college classmates to march from Selma to demand the right to vote for Black Americans across the South.

My focus will not be on the details of how we came to Selma, or the obstacles we had to overcome to join the march such as my father disowning me and ordering me out of his house, or my Army commanding officer threatening to cashier me from the corps of cadets if I came. You can read all those details in my report published in *American Heritage*.¹

Instead I speak today about why I walked out of my father's house to come to Selma. It all comes down to Martin Luther King, Jr.

As a white student at an all white college in the North, I safely watched the Black struggle for justice in the South from a distance. I watched as Black students who ordered coffee at a lunch counter, be arrested and jailed. I watched as Blacks who got on buses in Mississippi be dragged off and beaten by racist thugs. I watched as Medgar Evers who was the first Black student to register at Ole Miss be escorted to class by U.S. Marshalls to protect him from crowds of jeering whites. I watched as 600 Black protestors, who crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge to begin their march to the State Capitol to demand the right to vote, be bludgeoned by State troopers and arrested when they dropped to their knees in prayer.

I was horrified and outraged by what I saw, certain that such discrimination brought shame and abomination on our Nation. But I did not feel I had a role to play.

Then just days after watching the beatings on the Bridge, I heard Martin's call to People of Faith to come to Selma to join a second march to demand the right to vote.

This was the first time I had heard a Black civil rights leader call to White America to join a freedom march.

¹ Available at: <https://www.americanheritage.com/marching-king-selma>.

Yes, I thought, I can do this!

Martin's reaching out to the Faith Community was politically brilliant. Securing voting rights for Blacks in the South was at the core of any strategy to over-turn the counter-revolution that had reversed the outcome of the Civil War, and transformed the Reconstruction Amendments to secure rights in the Constitution into meaningless gestures.

Martin understood that to win the fight in Congress for voting rights, he needed the support of White America. The TV screens needed to show Black and white faces marching together.

Gathering here to honor Martin, we focus on how he helped transform 20th Century America. But we forget that he was actually the latest in a long line of Black leaders who carried forward a multi-generational struggle for freedom and justice.

We honor him for many things. He created a mass movement that empowered him to open the White House door, to demand that the voices of Black America be heard, and to demand that Presidents act to protect Blacks in America. He forced John Kennedy to introduce the Civil Rights Act in 1963 after the March on Washington, and with the march from Selma he pressured Lyndon Johnson to pass the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

But he was not the first Black man to gain an audience with a president to demand action for Black Americans. Frederick Douglass in 1863 became the first Black leader to meet a President in the White House. He organized Black regiments to fight for the Union, and met with Lincoln to demand that Black soldiers be treated fairly. Ultimately 200,000 Blacks, many who were escaped slaves, fought in the war that should be called the War to End Slavery.

Douglass endorsed Lincoln for re-election in 1864, and then pressured him to amend the Constitution to outlaw slavery.

After Lincoln's assassination, Douglass worked with Republican anti-slavery leaders in Congress to amend the Constitution to establish that Blacks are assured the equal protection of the law, and that former slaves be granted citizenship to reverse the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision holding that all Negroes, whether free or slave, are not citizens.

Douglass laid the foundation for Martin's campaign to pass the Voting Rights Act by playing a crucial role in winning passage of the 15th Amendment which guarantees the right to vote regardless of race, color or prior enslavement.

To make it possible for Douglass to enshrine these rights in the Constitution, 640,000 Americans died, and millions more soldiers and civilians were injured or disabled during the War to End Slavery. Douglass fought to guarantee the rights of Black men in the Constitution to vindicate this massive sacrifice by an entire generation of Americans.

But despite these political victories during Reconstruction, Blacks across the South had been denied these rights by campaigns of violence and terror that kept Black residents in virtual bondage for a century.

The Jim Crow system of discrimination and political oppression was imposed to perpetuate the dominance of the White power structure, and to maintain Black residents in economic servitude to the plantation class. This was no longer chattel slavery based on ownership, but was akin to slavery by guaranteeing cheap labor for the plantations.

In Lowndes County, Alabama, where Selma is, 80% of the population is Black, but in 1965 not one Black resident had been allowed to register to vote.

I felt compelled to honor Martin's call. As the recipients of a Nation freed from the chains of slavery, my generation carried the obligation to ensure that the hundreds of thousands who made the ultimate sacrifice to end slavery had not died in vain.

Martin's campaign was built on the foundation laid by giants like Douglass, and Lincoln, and the anti-slavery republicans in Congress who led the fight to protect the rights of all Americans in the Constitution.

We honor Martin Luther King, Jr., today because he won passage of the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act. In 1966 millions of Blacks across the South voted for the first time. Senators like Reverend Warnock, Jon Osoff, Tim Kaine and Black sheriffs in hundreds of counties in the South would not be elected today without Martin's success in protecting voting rights.

But Martin, and the multitudes like me, my classmates and the tens of thousands who empowered him, could win those victories in the 20th Century because of the great victories achieved by those who fought the war to end slavery, who fought to

embody equal rights in the Constitution, and to secure the right to vote regardless of race, color or prior servitude.

We are here today to honor Martin because he stands out as a giant who helped transform America, but he did not do it alone. He stood on the shoulders of giants, as we do now.

We are here today because *we* now bear the torch for freedom and justice. Martin continued in the 20th Century to fulfill the great American promise that all people “are Created Equal and endowed by Their Creator with certain inalienable rights, including among these Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” But now, in the 21st Century, we know that promise is yet to be fulfilled. The arc of the universe does not bend toward justice on its own, it bends when we the People bend it.

Thank you for joining me today in honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. I ask you to join in making the commitment to each other to stand together, arm in arm, brothers and sisters of all races and colors, to resist those who seek to undermine the promise of America, and to lift our voices to demand freedom, fairness and justice for all.

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