

Dr. King's Lesson: It's up to us

Written by Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr.
Friday, 25 January 2013 09:44 -



"We the people declare today that the most evident of truths — that all of us are created equal — is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls and Selma and Stonewall; just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone; to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth."

President Barack Obama offered a bold vision in his inaugural address on the day we commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday.

He then sketched the challenges we face to create a more perfect union. First, we must redress our extreme inequality for we know the country "cannot succeed when a shrinking few do very well and a growing many barely make it."

We must ensure that all of our children — from the streets of Detroit to the quiet lanes of Newtown — are safe from the scourge of poverty and gun violence.

We must take on the threat of climate change, for failure to do "would betray our children and future generations." And in the transition to sustainable energy and the green industrial revolution that will sweep the world, the president rightly called on us not to resist, but to lead.

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We must rescue our elections from the domination of money. The president mentioned at the very least voters should not have to stand for hours to cast a vote. But that surely is only a small reform needed for a system that is now an insult to democracy.

We must continue the march of freedom. Dr. King transformed America by bringing us from segregation to equal rights under law. Now President Obama calls for us to extend equality and freedom to gays and lesbians, to bring immigrants out from the shadows.

The eloquence and the historic moment should not mislead, however. The president laid out fundamental challenges that we have to address. But we know from his first term that progress will be made only if the current gridlock in Washington is broken.

And that will depend not on the president, but on the American people. The president will seek to make as much progress as he can, given the current distribution of power. It is up to the American people to change that distribution of power. That means not simply providing the wind at the president's back, but building a powerful movement that drives Congress and the White House to go further than they imagine possible.

Each of these changes will meet fierce resistance. Reviving the middle class requires empowering workers, curbing the privilege of the few, transforming a global economic strategy so it works for working families, not just for multinational corporations.

Redressing climate change will require overcoming the resistance of Big Oil. Curbing gun violence runs directly into the powerful gun lobby. Extending rights to gays and immigrants will meet the resistance of those who prey on our fears and gain from our divisions.

Historic leaders like President Obama can point the way and open the possibility of change. But from the Declaration of Independence on, change in this country has come only when Americans mobilized and forced the change.

That is the historic lesson of Dr. Martin Luther King, the experience of the movements that have made America better — from the abolitionists to the populists, from civil rights marchers to

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feminists, anti-war activists, environmentalists, and now those in the LGBT movement. Citizens of conscience mobilized must break through the roadblocks, challenge business as usual, and force the change.

Keep up with Rev. Jackson and the Rainbow PUSH Coalition at www.rainbowpush.org.