Remarks at the "Let Freedom Ring" Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

August 28, 2013

To the King family, who have sacrificed and inspired so much; to President Clinton; President Carter; Vice President Biden, Jill; fellow Americans.

Five decades ago today, Americans came to this honored place to lay claim to a promise made at our founding: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

In 1963, almost 200 years after those words were set to paper, a full century after a great war was fought and emancipation proclaimed, that promise—those truths—remained unmet. And so they came by the thousands from every corner of our country, men and women, young and old, Blacks who longed for freedom and Whites who could no longer accept freedom for themselves while witnessing the subjugation of others.

Across the land, congregations sent them off with food and with prayer. In the middle of the night, entire blocks of Harlem came out to wish them well. With the few dollars they scrimped from their labor, some bought tickets and boarded buses, even if they couldn't always sit where they wanted to sit. Those with less money hitchhiked or walked. They were seamstresses and steelworkers, students and teachers, maids and Pullman porters. They shared simple meals and bunked together on floors. And then, on a hot summer day, they assembled here, in our Nation's Capital, under the shadow of the Great Emancipator, to offer testimony of injustice, to petition their Government for redress, and to awaken America's long-slumbering conscience.

We rightly and best remember Dr. King's soaring oratory that day, how he gave mighty voice to the quiet hopes of millions, how he offered a salvation path for oppressed and oppressors alike. His words belong to the ages, possessing a power and prophecy unmatched in our time.

But we would do well to recall that day itself also belonged to those ordinary people whose names never appeared in the history books, never got on TV. Many had gone to segregated schools and sat at segregated lunch counters. They lived in towns where they couldn't vote and cities where their votes didn't matter. They were couples in love who couldn't marry, soldiers who fought for freedom abroad that they found denied to them at home. They had seen loved ones beaten and children firehosed, and they had every reason to lash out in anger or resign themselves to a bitter fate.

And yet they chose a different path. In the face of hatred, they prayed for their tormentors. In the face of violence, they stood up and sat in with the moral force of nonviolence. Willingly, they went to jail to protest unjust laws, their cells swelling with the sound of freedom songs. A lifetime of indignities had taught them that no man can take away the dignity and grace that God grants us. They had learned through hard experience what Frederick Douglass once taught: that freedom is not given, it must be won through struggle and discipline, persistence and faith.

That was the spirit they brought here that day. That was the spirit young people like John Lewis brought to that day. That was the spirit that they carried with them, like a torch, back to their cities and their neighborhoods. That steady flame of conscience and courage that would sustain them through the campaigns to come: through boycotts and voter registration drives and smaller marches far from the spotlight; through the loss of four little girls in Birmingham and the carnage of the Edmund Pettus Bridge and the agony of Dallas and California and Memphis. Through setbacks and heartbreaks and gnawing doubt, that flame of justice flickered; it never died.

And because they kept marching, America changed. Because they marched, a civil rights law was passed. Because they marched, a voting rights law was signed. Because they marched, doors of opportunity and education swung open so their daughters and sons could finally imagine a life for themselves beyond washing somebody else's laundry or shining somebody else's shoes. Because they marched, city councils changed, and State legislatures changed, and Congress changed, and yes, eventually, the White House changed.

Because they marched, America became more free and more fair, not just for African Americans, but for women and Latinos, Asians and Native Americans; for Catholics, Jews, and Muslims; for gays; for Americans with disabilities. America changed for you and for me. And the entire world drew strength from that example, whether the young people who watched from the other side of an Iron Curtain and would eventually tear down that wall or the young people inside South Africa who would eventually end the scourge of apartheid.

Those are the victories they won with iron wills and hope in their hearts. That is the transformation that they wrought with each step of their well-worn shoes. That's the debt that I and millions of Americans owe those maids, those laborers, those porters, those secretaries—folks who could have run a company maybe if they had ever had a chance; those White students who put themselves in harm's way, even though they didn't have to; those Japanese Americans who recalled their own internment; those Jewish Americans who had survived the Holocaust; people who could have given up and given in, but kept on keeping on, knowing that "weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

On the battlefield of justice, men and women without rank or wealth or title or fame would liberate us all in ways that our children now take for granted, as people of all colors and creeds live together and learn together and walk together and fight alongside one another and love one another and judge one another by the content of our character in this greatest nation on Earth.

To dismiss the magnitude of this progress—to suggest, as some sometimes do, that little has changed—that dishonors the courage and the sacrifice of those who paid the price to march in those years. Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, Martin Luther King, Jr.—they did not die in vain. Their victory was great.

But we would dishonor those heroes as well to suggest that the work of this Nation is somehow complete. The arc of the moral universe may bend towards justice, but it doesn't bend on its own. To secure the gains that this country has made requires constant vigilance, not complacency. Whether by challenging those who erect new barriers to the vote or ensuring that the scales of justice work equally for all and the criminal justice system is not simply a pipeline from underfunded schools to overcrowded jails, it requires vigilance.

And we'll suffer the occasional setback. But we will win these fights. This country has changed too much. People of good will, regardless of party, are too plentiful for those with ill will to change history's currents.

In some ways, though, the securing of civil rights, voting rights, the eradication of legalized discrimination, the very significance of these victories may have obscured a second goal of the march. For the men and women who gathered 50 years ago were not there in search of some abstract ideal. They were there seeking jobs as well as justice, not just the absence of oppression, but the presence of economic opportunity.

For what does it profit a man, Dr. King would ask, to sit at an integrated lunch counter if he can't afford the meal? This idea—that one's liberty is linked to one's livelihood, that the pursuit of happiness requires the dignity of work, the skills to find work, decent pay, some measure of material security—this idea was not new. Lincoln himself understood the Declaration of Independence in such terms, as a promise that in due time, "the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance."

And Dr. King explained that the goals of African Americans were identical to working people of all races: "Decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old-age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children, and respect in the community."

What King was describing has been the dream of every American. It's what's lured for centuries new arrivals to our shores. And it's along this second dimension—of economic opportunity, the chance through honest toil to advance one's station in life—where the goals of 50 years ago have fallen most short.

Yes, there have been examples of success within Black America that would have been unimaginable a half century ago. But as has already been noted: Black unemployment has remained almost twice as high as White employment, Latino unemployment close behind. The gap in wealth between races has not lessened, it's grown. And as President Clinton indicated, the position of all working Americans, regardless of color, has eroded, making the dream Dr. King described even more elusive.

For over a decade, working Americans of all races have seen their wages and incomes stagnate, even as corporate profits soar, even as the pay of a fortunate few explodes. Inequality has steadily risen over the decades. Upward mobility has become harder. In too many communities across this country, in cities and suburbs and rural hamlets, the shadow of poverty casts a pall over our youth, their lives a fortress of substandard schools and diminished prospects, inadequate health care and perennial violence.

And so as we mark this anniversary, we must remind ourselves that the measure of progress for those who marched 50 years ago was not merely how many Blacks could join the ranks of millionaires. It was whether this country would admit all people who are willing to work hard, regardless of race, into the ranks of a middle class life.

The test was not and never has been whether the doors of opportunity are cracked a bit wider for a few. It was whether our economic system provides a fair shot for the many: for the Black custodian and the White steelworker, the immigrant dishwasher and the Native American veteran. To win that battle, to answer that call—this remains our great unfinished business.

We shouldn't fool ourselves: The task will not be easy. Since 1963, the economy has changed. The twin forces of technology and global competition have subtracted those jobs that once provided a foothold into the middle class, reduced the bargaining power of American workers. And our politics has suffered. Entrenched interests, those who benefit from an unjust status quo, resisted any government efforts to give working families a fair deal, marshaling an army of lobbyists and opinion makers to argue that minimum wage increases or stronger labor laws or taxes on the wealthy who could afford it just to fund crumbling schools, that all these things violated sound economic principles. We'd be told that growing inequality was a price for a growing economy, a measure of this free market, that greed was good and compassion ineffective, and that those without jobs or health care had only themselves to blame.

And then, there were those elected officials who found it useful to practice the old politics of division, doing their best to convince middle class Americans of a great untruth: that government was somehow itself to blame for their growing economic insecurity; that distant bureaucrats were taking their hard-earned dollars to benefit the welfare cheat or the illegal immigrant.

And then, if we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that during the course of 50 years, there were times when some of us claiming to push for change lost our way. The anguish of assassinations set off self-defeating riots. Legitimate grievances against police brutality tipped into excuse-making for criminal behavior. Racial politics could cut both ways, as the transformative message of unity and brotherhood was drowned out by the language of recrimination. And what had once been a call for equality of opportunity—the chance for all Americans to work hard and get ahead—was too often framed as a mere desire for government support, as if we had no agency in our own liberation, as if poverty was an excuse for not raising your child and the bigotry of others was reason to give up on yourself.

All of that history is how progress stalled. That's how hope was diverted. It's how our country remained divided. But the good news is, just as was true in 1963, we now have a choice. We can continue down our current path, in which the gears of this great democracy grind to a halt and our children accept a life of lower expectations; where politics is a zero-sum game; where a few do very well while struggling families of every race fight over a shrinking economic pie. That's one path. Or we can have the courage to change.

The March on Washington teaches us that we are not trapped by the mistakes of history, that we are masters of our fate. But it also teaches us that the promise of this Nation will only be kept when we work together. We'll have to reignite the embers of empathy and fellow feeling, the coalition of conscience that found expression in this place 50 years ago.

And I believe that spirit is there, that truth force inside each of us. I see it when a White mother recognizes her own daughter in the face of a poor Black child. I see it when the Black youth thinks of his own grandfather in the dignified steps of an elderly White man. It's there when the native born recognizing that striving spirit of the new immigrant, when the interracial couple connects the pain of a gay couple who are discriminated against and understands it as their own.

That's where courage comes from: when we turn not from each other or on each other, but towards one another, and we find that we do not walk alone. That's where courage comes from. And with that courage, we can stand together for good jobs and just wages. With that courage, we can stand together for the right to health care in the richest nation on Earth for every person. With that courage, we can stand together for the right of every child, from the corners of Anacostia to the hills of Appalachia, to get an education that stirs the mind and

captures the spirit and prepares them for the world that awaits them. With that courage, we can feed the hungry and house the homeless and transform bleak wastelands of poverty into fields of commerce and promise.

America, I know the road will be long, but I know we can get there. Yes, we will stumble, but I know we'll get back up. That's how a movement happens. That's how history bends. That's how, when somebody is faint of heart, somebody else brings them along and says, come on, we're marching.

There's a reason why so many who marched that day, and in the days to come, were young. For the young are unconstrained by habits of fear, unconstrained by the conventions of what is. They dared to dream differently, to imagine something better. And I am convinced that same imagination, the same hunger of purpose stirs in this generation.

We might not face the same dangers of 1963, but the fierce urgency of now remains. We may never duplicate the swelling crowds and dazzling procession of that day so long ago—no one can match King's brilliance—but the same flame that lit the heart of all who are willing to take a first step for justice, I know that flame remains.

That tireless teacher who gets to class early and stays late and dips into her own pocket to buy supplies because she believes that every child is her charge, she's marching.

That successful businessman who doesn't have to, but pays his workers a fair wage and then offers a shot to a man, maybe an ex-con who is down on his luck, he's marching.

The mother who pours her love into her daughter so that she grows up with the confidence to walk through the same doors as anybody's son, she's marching.

The father who realizes the most important job he'll ever have is raising his boy right, even if he didn't have a father—especially if he didn't have a father at home—he's marching.

The battle-scarred veterans who devote themselves not only to helping their fellow warriors stand again and walk again and run again, but to keep serving their country when they come home, they are marching.

Everyone who realizes what those glorious patriots knew on that day, that change does not come from Washington, but to Washington; that change has always been built on our willingness, we the people, to take on the mantle of citizenship, you are marching.

And that's the lesson of our past. That's the promise of tomorrow: that in the face of impossible odds, people who love their country can change it. That when millions of Americans of every race and every region, every faith and every station, can join together in a spirit of brotherhood, then those mountains will be made low and those rough places will be made plain and those crooked places, they straighten out towards grace, and we will vindicate the faith of those who sacrificed so much and live up to the true meaning of our creed, as one Nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:07 p.m. at the Lincoln Memorial. In his remarks, he referred to Jill T. Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 50th anniversary, "Let Freedom Ring" ceremony commemorating.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Carter, James E., Jr.; Clinton, William J.; Lewis, John R.

Subjects: Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Economy, national : Income inequality, increase; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Employment and unemployment : Unemployment rate; Holidays and special observances : March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 50th anniversary.

DCPD Number: DCPD201300581.