

# **Georgia Tech MLK Lecture**

## **Actualizing the Dream: The Future of Nonviolent Political Protest**

**(30-45 minutes)**

Good afternoon Georgia Tech! Thank you President Peterson ... Sujay and Renee ... Sandra Duplessis and my other lunch mates earlier today: Dr. Ervin, Dr. Ross, Dr. Royster, Renee Copeland, Stephanie Ray, Chris Burke and Dr. Wilder.

I want to thank you all for being here, and it's good to see that you all were not too drunk on UGA tears to make it hear today.

And of course we are less than a week away from the commemoration of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday – and just months away from the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his assassination. A good pastor friend of mine, Bishop Dr. William Barber, founder of the Moral Mondays Movement and president of Repairers of the Breach out of North Carolina, who has revived Dr. King's "poor people's campaign" and is leading the call nationwide to refocus our politics on morality around caring for the poor ... said to me recently that he hopes that the commemorations in this jubilee year of the Civil Rights Movement – when we pause to remember the martyrdom of not just Dr. King but also Bobby Kennedy – doesn't turn into a reburial. Because as Bishop Barber said to me we don't need to re-embalm Dr. King. Instead, we need to use this anniversary as an opportunity to resurrect his true legacy. Because the greatest enemy of King's legacy in my view is the postcardization of his words. Dr. King is not a sunny postcard about black boys and girls and white boys and girls sitting down at the table of brotherhood. That's too easy for an America that seems to have an allergy to confronting its founding creed of white supremacy and slavery ... that seems unwilling and unable to grapple with the fact that King at his most well known was less respected per the Gallup poll than George Wallace ... it's too easy to simply take King's beautiful words and put them into a greeting card that covers over all our national sins. King at the end of his short life was not a writer of greeting

card poems. He was a radical warrior for justice. He was a civil rights leader locked out of the White House over his opposition to the war in Vietnam ... pursued and persecuted by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI ... a young man unable to spend meaningful time with his wife and his four young children ... and man looking into the American abyss and increasingly disillusioned with the question of whether America could truly overcome its racial legacy.

Let us never forget that the sermon tucked in Dr. King's pocket on the day he died on the balcony of room 306 at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, was entitled "why America may go to hell."

The Martin King of four years earlier, in 1964 ... was an ebullient young preacher ... just 35 years old and on his way to accept the Nobel Peace prize at Christmas, and stopping in London to speak at Oxford and telling the BBC he could foresee a Negro president in the United States in 25 years or less ... one-upping Bobby Kennedy, who had stated that he could foresee a Negro president in 40 years or so.

The Martin King of 1968 was an agitator against an unjust war, and against unjust economics, not yet 40 years old. He was fighting to create an interracial, radical coalition for poor people of all races, including universal healthcare. One year to the day prior to his assassination, King delivered a sermon at Riverside Church in New York City, telling those assembled:

And some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. And we must rejoice as well, for surely this is the first time in our nation's history that a significant number of [its] religious leaders have chosen to move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of a firm dissent based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history.

Exactly one year later, Dr. King was dead. Two months after King, Bobby Kennedy – just four years older – was gunned down, too. He was 43 ... both of them died younger than I am now. Younger than Jay Z. Or Will Smith.

Dr. King was born a month before my late mother. If she and he were alive today they would be on the verge of turning 90 years old. These stories are not ancient. This history is barely past. And it's not quantifiable on a postcard.

On April 8, 1968 – four days after Dr. King's assassination, Congressman John Conyers of Michigan, who in 1971 would become a founding member of the congressional black caucus – but who in 1968 was one of just SIX African-Americans in congress:

John Conyers Jr. of Michigan...

Charles C. Diggs Jr. of Michigan

William L. Dawson of Chicago

Augustus F. Hawkins of California

Robert N.C. Nix Sr. of Pennsylvania

And Republican Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts...

... introduced a bill making King's birthday, January 15<sup>th</sup>, a federal holiday. The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Change here in Atlanta was founded not long thereafter, on June 26<sup>th</sup> ... 21 days after the assassination of Bobby Kennedy. King's widow, Coretta Scott King began to throw herself into the effort to make Conyers' bill, and her husband's memorial holiday, a reality.

On January 15, 1969, the King Center began the observance of the King holiday.

In 1971, Coretta Scott King delivered to congress a petition circulated by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference bearing more than 3 million signatures calling for the Conyers bill to be passed. Congress took no action.

By 1973, Illinois became the first state to commemorate Dr. King's birthday on the third Monday of January, spurred by future black Chicago mayor Harold Washington.

By 1974, a handful of states were commemorating King's birthday, not just Illinois, but also Connecticut and Massachusetts ... and a year later, New Jersey came on board... but notably not King's home state of Georgia ... and there was still no federal law.

It took eight years for the bill to finally get a vote, at the urging of President Jimmy Carter, and it was defeated in the House by five votes in November of 1979. But Coretta King kept on. She testified before congress numerous times calling for approval of the bill. She mobilized mayors and governors and ordinary citizens and even Stevie Wonder in the effort, who in 1981 along with producers in Florida released the song "Happy Birthday" on the Motown label, adding to the popular momentum for the bill. 1981 was an interesting year for the civil rights movement. America had a new president – Ronald Reagan – who just 12 years after King's assassination had launched his campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where Goodman, Schwerner and Cheney were murdered in 1964 ... on a platform of states rights.

But Mrs. King pressed on. She returned to congress to testify again in 1980. A second petition was delivered to House Speaker Tip O'Neill in 1982 and this time it has 6 million signatures.

On August 27, 1983 – the King Center here in Atlanta convened the "20th Anniversary March on Washington," supported by more than 750 organizations.

More than 500,000 people converge on the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, with every single speaker calling on congress and President Reagan to pass the King Holiday and sign it into law.

When the bill finally got another vote in August of 1983, this time it passed the House 338 to 90. The bill was sponsored by Democrat Katie Hall of Indiana and Republican Jack Kemp of New York. But in the Senate, the bill ran into the opposition of Republican senators Jesse Helms and John P. East of North Carolina. On October 3, 1983 Helms read from a 300 page dossier on King written by an East aide alleging that King had Communist ties, a dossier provided to every member of the Senate, which Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan threw to the ground and stomped on it, labeling it a “packet of filth.” Helms persisted, calling for the release of FBI surveillance tapes on King that were supposed to be sealed until 2027. A federal judge denied his request, and the very next day, October 19, 1982, the MLK Day bill, sponsored by Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, passed the Senate 78 to 22. It was signed into law by Ronald Reagan on November 3<sup>rd</sup>.

The first official holiday was observed on the third Monday in January 1986. Just 17 states participated.

That number had grown to 44 states by 1989.

But by 1990, a study by the Wall Street Journal found that just 18 percent of 318 corporate employers gave their employees a paid holiday on MLK Day.

The last five states to finally give in and recognize the King holiday?

Arizona in 1993 – thanks in part to opposition by one Senator John McCain...

New Hampshire in 1999 ...

Virginia ... finally replacing a holiday honoring confederate generals Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee ...

Utah ... which changed Human Rights Day to King Day ...

And South Carolina ... which reluctantly made King Day the sole paid holiday, rather than giving state residents a choice between a grab bag that included King and three Confederate remembrances.

In the year 2000.

I tell you this to acquaint you with the compression of history. History seems distant when in fact it's not that long ago at all.

On February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1968 ... Echol Cole and Robert Walker ... two black sanitation workers ... in Memphis, Tennessee, were crushed to death in an accident caused by a truck that malfunctioned. Echol Cole was 36 years old and Robert Walker just 30. They were riding in the back of a garbage truck on a Tuesday morning when the truck's obsolete mechanisms malfunctioned ... crushing the men and mangling their bodies.

Because the two men were hourly workers ... they were not covered by workman's compensation insurance. The men earned about \$500 per week and neither of them had life insurance. Their families didn't have enough money to bury them. According to the local paper, Walker's wife was pregnant when he died.

On February 11, 1968 ... my mother's birthday, by the way ... nearly 1300 black sanitation workers went on strike in Memphis, protesting filthy working conditions, racial discrimination, substandard wages, and lack of safety standards and insurance. According to the Tennessee Encyclopedia, black sanitation workers in the

state had endured horrendous conditions that they had been actively fighting for five years, when the first black union activist was fired for his advocacy. These men:

... lived below the poverty level while working fulltime jobs, and 40 percent of them qualified for welfare to supplement their meager salaries. They received virtually no health care benefits, pensions, or vacations, worked in filthy conditions, and lacked such simple amenities as a place to eat and shower. They carried leaky garbage tubs which spilled maggots and refuse on them, while white supervisors called grown men "boy" and sent them home without pay for the slightest infraction. The sanitation workers walked out spontaneously, without support from the AFSCME international, after supervisors sent blacks home without pay during a rain storm while keeping whites on at full pay.

The deaths of Cole and Walker were simply the last straw.

The striking black sanitation workers demanded that the union, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) recognize their Local, 1733 and that the city recognize it too. In a city that was 40 percent black, but where 6 in 10 black residents lived below the poverty line ... they demanded a hearing of their grievances and economic and social equality. The strike would go on for 64 days. For context, the Montgomery Bus Boycott that began in December 1956 lasted 381 days.

Dr. King had launched the Poor People's Campaign in November 1967 at the urging of Marion Wright – before she was Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund, and mother of the amazing filmmaker who made O.J. Made in America ... and when she was director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund – basically her generation's Sherrilyn Ifill. The Poor People's campaign launched in Jackson, Mississippi, where Medgar Evers had fought to register voters and died trying. It was the next chapter in King's struggle for equality – after desegregation. The goal of

the Poor People's Campaign was to use nonviolent direct action to press for what King believed was a fundamental agreement in full citizenship – economic security.

King called the Poor People's Campaign “the beginning of a new co-operation, understanding, and a determination by poor people of all colors and backgrounds to assert and win their right to a decent life and respect for their culture and dignity” and the movement united black, poor white, Native American, Puerto Rican and Mexican American community leaders in a common goal for the first time in America.

The Memphis strike fit in with this goal, though the strike polarized the city, with white and black Memphis residents taking opposite sides. Black residents were incensed by the violent police reactions to the strike, including the beating and macing of peaceful protesters including prominent black leaders and even pastors who marched in support of the striking workers. White residents sided with the city mayor – who refused to negotiate with the black workers and sent police to put the strike down by any means necessary. The beatings and violence and racial slurs prompted marchers to adopt the slogan on signs and placards that read “I Am a Man.”

At the urging of a local pastor, Reverend James T. Lawson, Dr. King traveled to Memphis on March 18<sup>th</sup>, to lead a nonviolent march on the sanitation workers' behalf, where he gave a speech to some 15,000 people.

In his speech, Dr. King recounted the story of Lazarus, a poor man, and a rich man unnamed ... the story is from the Gospel of Luke ... the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter and the 19<sup>th</sup> through the 31<sup>st</sup> verse, and it reads as follows:

<sup>19</sup> “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. <sup>20</sup> At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered

with sores <sup>21</sup> and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

<sup>22</sup> "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup> In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup> So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

<sup>25</sup> "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup> And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

<sup>27</sup> "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

<sup>29</sup> "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

<sup>30</sup> "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

<sup>31</sup> "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

And with that, Dr. King said to those workers in Memphis that America just might go to hell... saying:

*And I come by here to say that America, too, is going to hell if she doesn't use her wealth. If America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty and make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life, she, too, will go to hell. And I will hear America through her historians, years and generations to come, saying, "We built gigantic buildings to kiss the skies. We built gargantuan bridges to*

*span the seas. Through our spaceships we were able to carve highways through the stratosphere. Through our airplanes we are able to dwarf distance and place time in chains. Through our submarines we were able to penetrate oceanic depths.”*

*It seems that I can hear the God of the universe saying, “Even though you have done all of that, I was hungry and you fed me not, I was naked and you clothed me not. The children of my sons and daughters were in need of economic security and you didn’t provided it for them. And so you cannot enter the kingdom of greatness.” This may well be the indictment on America.*

...

Dr. King’s speech made the Memphis sanitation workers strike a national cause celebre, attracting union support from around the country and more importantly, television cameras. King called for a general strike, and added the right to unionized to his universal declaration of human rights. But King’s return was delayed by a freak snowstorm that shut down the city of Memphis on March 21<sup>st</sup> – a day with not even rain in the forecast – but which ended with 17 inches of snow falling in 21 hours. Dr. Lawson reportedly joked that Mother Nature had delivered Dr. King his general strike.

When King returned to the city on March 28<sup>th</sup>, he was determined to lead a nonviolent march the following day that would put a spotlight on the Poor People’s Campaign.

But the peaceful march of more than 5000 people took a turn for the worse when some 200 marchers broke off from the main group and began smashing storefront windows, with some accused of looting.

The violence resulted in the death of a 16-year-old unarmed black teenager named Larry Payne, who was shot dead by police who responded to the window breaking. Riots ensued, prompting the mayor to implement a curfew, with nearly 4,000

national guard troops mobilized by the Tennessee governor. More than 700 people were hospitalized, and the national news media, conservative commentators and the FBI put the blame on Martin King. The city went to court and to try and enjoin Dr. King from leading any further marches in the city of Memphis. The Poor People's Campaign, which was supposed to move next to Washington D.C., seemed in jeopardy.

But King was deeply disturbed by the violence and he vowed to indeed return to Memphis a third time to try again, despite protests from his staff here in Atlanta ... and to stage a peaceful mass march in the city calling for a revolution of human rights. That was why Dr. King and his lieutenants checked into the Lorraine Motel and why he gave that speech – his last public speech – on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1968 at the city's Bishop Charles Mason temple. When King was set to leave Atlanta, warning his wife that a price had been put on his head, his flight was delayed for over an hour as officials searched for a bomb after receiving a death threat directed at King.

Dr. King delivered his final speech in the midst of a violent thunderstorm that kept many people from attending. His throat was reportedly sore and he had no script. Some 1,300 members of AFSCME Local 1733 and their supporters gathered in that building to hear what he had to say. He was introduced by the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, whom he described in his opening remarks as “the best friend that I have in the world.”

Dr. King's final speech is typically remembered for its rising final passage – the part that goes “I've been to the Mountaintop...” But that actually isn't what the bulk of that speech was about. It was about economic justice and fairness, and the long, steady march of nonviolent protest. Dr. King told those assembled in the Mason hall:

Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia;

Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee -- the cry is always the same:  
"We want to be free."

And another reason that I'm happy to live in this period is that we have been forced to a point where we are going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn't force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them. Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence. That is where we are today.

And also in the human rights revolution, if something isn't done, and done in a hurry, to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed. Now, I'm just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period to see what is unfolding. And I'm happy that He's allowed me to be in Memphis. I can remember -- I can remember when Negroes were just going around as Ralph has said, so often, scratching where they didn't itch, and laughing when they were not tickled. But that day is all over. We mean business now, and we are determined to gain our rightful place in God's world.

And that's all this whole thing is about. We aren't engaged in any negative protest and in any negative arguments with anybody. We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people. We are saying -- We are saying that we are God's children. And that we are God's children, we don't have to live like we are forced to live.

Now, what does all of this mean in this great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the

slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery.

King asked those assembled that day to develop what he called a “dangerous unselfishness.”

That's the question before you tonight. Not, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to my job. Not, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor?" The question is not, "If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?" The question is, "If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?" That's the question.

Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation.

Not to “make America great again,” but to make America better.

King talked about his brush with death ten years earlier when he was nearly stabbed to death by a deranged black woman in Harlem, and his thankfulness that he didn't sneeze the sneeze that would have moved the wound the few centimeters it would have needed to go to stop his heart. He spoke of having no more fear of death.

Within 24 hours, death came for him.

Four days after King's assassination, Mrs. King led more than 42,000 people, including SCLC and union leaders ... in a silent march to Memphis City Hall in honor of Dr. King, demanding that the mayor give in to the union's demands. The national AFSCME union pledged to stand with the union until justice was done.

President Lyndon Johnson sent his undersecretary of Labor, James Reynolds, to Memphis, to help mediate an end to the strike. And it did end, two weeks later on April 16<sup>th</sup>, with an agreement to give raises to the black employees and to recognize their union local.

Dr. King's commitment to nonviolence, coupled with the extraordinary and tragic violence visited upon him gave his Poor People's Campaign its first real victory.

The time lapse between Dr. King's assassination and Ronald Reagan's election was TWELVE years.

The time that elapsed between Ronald Reagan's election and the final state's full implementation of the King Holiday was TWENTY years.

We are today, just 18 years from the final consent by the final state to give in to the King holiday.

Which brings us to today, and the theme of today's commemoration ... on the future of nonviolent protest in America.

Today ... we have no Bobby Kennedy and no Nicholas Katzenbach in the Justice Department, as the civil rights leaders and students had to deal with in the 1960s. We have Jefferson Beauregard Sessions ... named for not one confederate general, but two, and who Mrs. King fought to keep off the federal bench nearly as hard as she fought to make her husband's birthday a federal holiday.

Should Black Lives Matter resurface on the streets of a major city, the straight line between the violent state reaction on the streets of Memphis in March of 1968 and the streets of Ferguson in 2014 will likely be clear as day.

We have a president who goes out of his way to denigrate the peaceful protests of black athletes ... 50 years after Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in protest to racism and Apartheid at the 1968 summer Olympic Games in Mexico City.

Although today's Tommie Smiths and John Carlos' -- like Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James, have a way to clap back. And they aren't afraid to do so.

Today, we continue to face vast racial disparities in economic opportunity in America.

According to a September 2017 study reprinted in Forbes Magazine:

...the median black family has just \$1,700 in wealth—total assets minus total debt. Thirty years ago, that same family had \$6,800 in today's dollars. Latino families at the median have similarly small assets, just \$2,000, and also saw a decline over the past three decades.

White median household wealth, meanwhile, is significantly higher: \$116,800, up from \$102,000 over the same period.

...

By 2053, just 10 years after the country is projected to become majority non-white, black median families will own zero wealth if current trends continue. Twenty years later, Latino median families will follow suit. White median families will continue to own six figures.

Even those black and Latino families who've achieved the traditional markers of middle class life—a good-paying job and a college degree—still lag far behind their white counterparts in terms of wealth. Black and Latino families with a member holding a four-year degree own just a fifth of the wealth of equivalent white families. In fact, they own less wealth than a white family whose head has just a high school diploma.

In 242 years of American history, we have had but one black president out of 45 ... and just 8 black Senators ... two from Mississippi, TWO from Massachusetts ... One from South Carolina ... and THREE from Illinois.

There have been exactly FOUR black governors ... Pinckney Pinchback for 35 days in Louisiana in the 1870s, following the impeachment of the state's white governor, Henry Clay Warmoth ... Douglas Wilder in Virginia, Deval Patrick in Massachusetts and David Paterson in New York in the 1990s and 2000s. Though perhaps Georgia will make Stacey Abrams number five...

Hispanic and Asian-American communities haven't fared much better.

America faces the greatest wealth inequality of any modern industrialized nation.

Poor people, black and white, face higher and higher barriers to living a dignified life.

One-quarter of American workers earn less than \$10 per hour, placing them below the federal poverty line. They include cashiers, fast food workers and nurse's aides.

Last year, the nation's top 10 percent income earners controlled 47 percent of the nation's wealth, putting us on par with Russia, at 46 percent for Russian and standing in contrast with Europe, at 37 percent.

The Top 1% in America now hold 38.6% of the nation's wealth, up from 33.7% in 2007. The bottom 90% now holds only 22.8% of the nation's total wealth, down from 28.5% in 2007. And the union movement those Memphis workers fought for is fading.

This country has a very long way to go to be “a more perfect union.”

And yet today, there are signs of hope.

Black women are reclaiming our time, per Maxine Waters, and demanding that our reliability at the voting booth be repaid with actual political power, with black women like Stacey stepping forward and presenting themselves as potential leaders of states like Georgia and African-American candidates stepping forward in states from Virginia to Iowa. Atlanta – the birthplace of Dr. King – has its second black woman mayor, Keisha Lance Bottoms – and black women are running cities from New Orleans, Shreveport and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to Charlotte, NC to Baltimore, Maryland, Compton, California and Gary, Indiana ... not to mention Washington D.C., Toledo, Ohio, Rochester, New York, Tacoma, Washington, Fontana, California, New Haven, Connecticut, Flint, Michigan and Camden, New Jersey.

The fight for DACA and fairness and justice for immigrants isn't waning – it's growing, from California to New York and in between, as states vow to fight to protect their immigrant communities from federal oppression.

The attempts to bar Muslim travelers are being beaten back in the courts.

And the courts are striking blow after blow against racial gerrymandering and unfair redistricting that suppresses the right of all people to vote ... most recently in North Carolina.

Slowly, but surely, people of good will are fighting back against the retrenchment and revanchism, nativism, xenophobia and hate that sometimes feels like it has overtaken America.

And companies like H&M are on notice that we simply don't have time for the games.

The white nationalist violence in Charlottesville served as yet another call to vigilance against violence and retrogression that has united the forces of proactive change.

Women all across this country are demanding an end to sexual violence and exploitation, in every industry and every profession.

Reverend Barber and a coalition of black and white clergy and activists have launched a new poor people's campaign, and are renewing the call for economic justice, and justice for the poor, who we must now defend with more vigor than ever against a federal government that thinks "welfare reform" means attacking the safety net of Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security, along with SNAP and even children's healthcare.

And a young man who grew up in activism with Doctor King as his leader and mentor, John Lewis, and who took the brunt of violence to fight for the right of black people to vote and to march, is now the conscience leader of the United States congress.

On Monday, all 50 states will celebrate Dr. King's Day on his actual birthday, January 15<sup>th</sup>. Let us not commemorate his life and his death with greeting cards truncating his most uplifting words. Let us instead delve into the difficult work of reviving King's struggle. That struggle is not always going to be heartwarming. It is almost always going to be difficult, and painfully revealing about America.

But just as it was for the struggling and impoverished sanitation workers of Memphis, in the end, it is what God and destiny have called us to do. For if we don't fight for the least of these, who will?