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April 4, 2008

Hillary's Remarks on the 40th Anniversary of Dr. King's Death in Memphis, Tennessee

Thank you all. I am deeply honored to be here today on this very important commemoration and for this significant gathering. I want to thank Bishop Blake for his leadership here at home and around the world, particularly in Africa. His personal commitment to the people and children of Africa has resounded so profoundly beyond his church and beyond our shores. It sets a good example and it issues a challenge for so many others. I thank you Bishop.

This is a very distinguished gathering here. I want to recognize my long time friend Ambassador Charles Stith who did superb work in Tanzania and has continued with his innovative and unique commitment at Boston University to creating an archive for the papers and memory of African leaders. That will be part of our history. It will not be lost. It will be there for generations to come. One thinks about Dr. King studying at that great university and those who would follow in his footsteps or in any other's will now have a much broader and richer historical scholarship record to learn from.

I want to thank my friends and another great leader, Reverend Eugene Rivers, for his commitment over many, many years to helping young people and providing alternatives in a way that keeps faith with our faith. But which puts aside the trappings of church and religion and goes into the streets. That has made such a difference to so many over such a long time.

We are also honored to be with the Chairman of the Judiciary Committee in the House of Representatives, Congressman John Conyers, who has led with such prophetic commitment as well to what is right. And now is in a position to influence the future of our country. It will be a good day, Mr. Chairman, when you don't have to be investigating all of the abuses of power of a president any longer. And we'll be able to come together around a positive agenda.

Congressman Steve Cohen, I'm grateful for his leadership. My dear friend, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, who just came in, who is, I would say peripatetic, in that she has more miles logged than anyone I know. I talked to Sheila from Iraq, from Africa, from Texas, New York, Washington, D.C., because she is a woman on the move. I'm so pleased that she is here as well.

Mayor Willie Herenton, one of the great long-time committed mayors of this city, and is helping to oversee its renaissance. Memphis is on the way back, mayor and that has a lot to do with your spirit and your love of this city. Mayor Wharton of Shelby County, your partner in such activities. One of the reasons I wanted to be here today was not only to honor the memory, the legacy and the challenges left to us by Dr. King, but also to support Memphis and to support what you are trying to do to really seize the future with confidence and optimism.

Bishop Brooks, Bishop Macking, other distinguished clergy who are here. I am not sure if all of us are aware of the coming together in Memphis today of so many from so many different groups to find common cause. Now we must leave Memphis united and committed to the changes that await our actions.

Ruth Davis, the head of Memphis Sanitation Workers, that is such an important person to recognize because in a very real way we would not be here if it were not for that strike and that demand in for human rights and justice that happened 40 years ago. Secretary Rodney Slater, it is always an honor to be anywhere with my long-time friend from Arkansas.

Some weeks ago I was with Reverend Billy Kyles at his church. As anyone who knows Reverend Kyles can attest, he has spent the last 40 years witnessing - witnessing to Dr. King's life and death, because he was a witness. A witness who has taken the horror and tragedy of that day and channeled it into a mission to reach out wherever anyone who would listen to what was at stake, and still is, in our country and around the world.

It is hard to believe that it has been 40 years. And it is also heart-breaking to know that Dr. King has been gone from this earth longer than he was here. When one thinks of his life - such a short life -

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6/3/2008

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6/3/2008

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6/3/2008

Response to VP Inquiry
6/3/2008

Louisiana Democratic Party Chair and Automatic Delegate Chris Whittington Endorses Hillary
6/2/2008

Statement from Hillary Clinton On Gay Pride Month
6/2/2008

New York Automatic Delegate Endorses Hillary
6/2/2008

going by in just a moment of time, but having such a profound and lasting impact on all of us. As a young woman, I was privileged to be taken to hear Dr. King speak by a youth minister who opened my eyes and ears and my horizons. Dr. King's call to action that evening in Chicago led me to confront a world bigger and broader than the one I inhabited. He had a way of doing that, of pushing us outside our own comfort zone, of making it clear that we had to be part of the revolution that was going on. It wasn't a revolution of guns. It was a revolution of hearts and minds, of attitudes and actions.

When one heard Dr. King speak, and I stood in line for a very long time that night to shake his hand. And he was gracious, and he was kind to lean over to shake the hand of a 14-year-old girl from the from the suburbs of Chicago, who went to an all-white church and an all-white school, and lived in an all-white suburb. But he didn't ask me, as I reached out my hand, where do you live, what is your experience? He just took it and looked in my face and thanked me for coming.

That Dr. King had such a profound and lasting impact on a young white girl, that he had that kind of impact on millions of people of all colors, faiths, ages and walks of life, tells us something about the reach and power of his vision. It was a vision big enough and bold enough and grace-filled enough to embrace every last one of us. And when he came here to Memphis to speak out on behalf of workers, he wasn't only speaking for those sanitation workers who were denied their rights, who had seen two of their fellow workers die in a cascade of garbage a few weeks before. He was speaking out for all workers everywhere who are exploited and abused and denied their basic rights.

When Dr. King protested the Vietnam War, he wasn't just speaking on behalf of black soldiers, but all soldiers and civilians – Vietnamese and Americans alike. When he worked on behalf of the poor here in America and around the world, he wasn't just speaking for the poor he knew, that he could see with his own eyes, but the poor who knew no boundaries of geography or color. And when he stood against discrimination, he wasn't just seeking to free African Americans from the shackles of slavery and the past that had been shaped by that abomination; he was seeking to break the shackles of hatred on the hearts of us all. He yearned for our country to fulfill the ideals that it had given lip service to, that were embodied in our founding documents. In his last speech here, he took us on a tour of history, but showed us the unfinished business and unrealized promises of America.

Dr. King understood our constitution better than most of us. He knew it was crafted to expand as our hearts expanded. It was not a constricted document from one place in time, but an expansive proclamation of what America could become if we had the courage to do so. Slavery was written onto that document, but so was the potential for equality. He waged that revolution, but not just to change our laws, as I heard Bishop Blake talking about, but to change our hearts and behaviors. He reminded us that those who signed our founding documents were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir; the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In the end he asked nothing more than that we redeem that promise, each in our own way through faith-based institutions, through our businesses, our labor unions, through our political and public service. And even though as originally drafted we did not include Dr. King or me either, women and African Americans were left out of America's founding promises, but he never gave up and neither should we.

His faith in America animated and sustained his journey. Like with any faith, there were dark moments when one doubts, when one is on the brink of giving up and throwing in the towel. But he would always come back from those dark places and so must we. The tenacity of Dr. King's faith is all the more extraordinary when we think of the ways it was tested. By all the critics and the media attacking his work, by the death threats, the bombings, the beatings, the stabbings, the murder, the grinding hard work day after day of just getting up and moving on, even the speech he gave here at this great complex wasn't supposed to be delivered. The crowd demanded it. And he came. He always answered the call. For those who are clergy, you know that it sometimes tests one's constitution and one's faith to constantly be asked to do more to reach out to keep going.

Someone of lesser heart and lesser faith might have grown weary doing good, might have given up, but he persisted in the struggle. And we know the results. So much has changed. I look at the young people standing in the back of this room. And it may be hard for you to imagine what you read in the history books, what your parents and your grandparents tell you. Jim Crowe is now something you read about. The people in this room lived under it. Because of Dr. King, these young people, my daughter's generation, grew up taking for granted that children of all colors could attend school together. Because of him, after 219 years and 43 presidents who have been white men, this next generation will grow up taking for granted that a woman or an African American can be President of the United States of America.

But as far as we've come, we know the journey is far from over. Some days when you open up the newspaper and you read the headlines, it feels like we tumbled right back down that mountain top, doesn't it? Some days it's amazing how deep the valley can be. At times like those I think of what Dr. King said in his last speech, how he acknowledged we are living in a time of turmoil and upheaval, but then admonished us to remember only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. Dr. King saw the darkness of a nation torn apart by petty human differences, but he imagined one knit back

together by our shared humanity. He saw so many going hungry in a land of plenty, but he envisioned an America where our prosperity was shared. He saw America embroiled in an endless war, but imagined a principled peace. While our problems were grave, he never stopped believing that our promise was greater. He saw us not as we were, but as we could and should be. Isn't it about time we started seeing ourselves as Dr. King saw us?

Isn't it about time we came together as we have in Memphis to find the solutions to make America what it can and should be? When I say solutions, I mean good jobs. Jobs you can raise a family on. Jobs that give people a shot at the middle class, to be able to stay there and live with dignity and respect. When I say solutions, I mean respecting the role of the American labor movement that has given that dignity and respect to so many. This time, once again, to give back the support we need to those who help workers organize and demand their rights.

When I say solutions, I mean finally addressing the scourge of poverty that stalks so many. I believe, mayor, Memphis has about a 25% poverty rate, down over the last years, but still far too high. I believe we should appoint a cabinet level position that will be solely and fully devoted to ending poverty as we know it in America. A position that will focus the attention of our nation on the issue and never let it go. A person who I could see being asked by the president every single day what have you done to end poverty in America? No more excuses. No more whining, but instead, a concerted effort.

It's the kind of solution that Dr. King's son Martin has been passionately advocating for. When I say solutions, I mean schools worthy of our children that give each child a chance to live up to his or her God-given potential. How about appointing Supreme Court justices who will actually uphold Brown versus Board of Education and not reverse the progress that has been made? When I say solutions, I mean quality, affordable health care for every American. No exceptions. Everyone entitled to health insurance. No more going into the emergency room. Instead, going in the front door to the doctor's office to be taken care of, to get that preventive health care that will keep you healthy.

I mean restoring America's moral leadership in the world, leading the fight against AIDS, Malaria and TB, against poverty and genocide. We cannot let our brothers and sisters in Africa and around the world continue to suffer needlessly. And I mean ending the war that has claimed too many of our precious sons and daughters; ending it as quickly and responsibly as humanly possible. And yet we must demand that our government pass laws that reflect our values. Hate crimes laws, anti-discrimination laws, equal pay laws and so much more. But that is not enough. The solutions we seek are not just about what government does or business does or labor unions or even faith-based institutions do. It is what each and every one of us is called to do.

There is still too much hatred dividing too many human hearts. Every one of us has a chance, practically every day, to stand up to intolerance and injustice. Like many of you here who are of a certain age, I will never forget where I was when I heard Dr. King had been killed. I was a junior in college. And I remember hearing about it and just feeling such despair. I walked onto my dorm room, took my book bag and hurled it across the room. It felt like everything had been shattered, like we would never be able to put the pieces together again.

I joined a protest march in Boston. I wore a black armband. I worked to convince my college to recruit more students and faculty of color, but it felt like it wasn't enough. And then a few months later we heard of the assassination of Robert Kennedy, whose eloquence and courage had helped to persuade the people of Indianapolis to follow Dr. King's example of non-violence. I remember wandering through the encampments of the Poor People's March on Washington talking with those who had come from literally around the world to witness against poverty and injustice. It felt like the doors had closed on the hope that so many had felt. But that would have been such a disservice to Dr. King. To have taken the despair, the outrage and just ended with that.

Dr. King taught us everything we needed to know about his legacy and how to carry it forward, but in the end it is up to each of us to walk that path. It is not an easy path. It was hard for him. It is hard for us. Sometimes we take steps backwards so maybe then we can figure out a new way forward. But I have abiding confidence, and yes, faith that we can make our way to higher ground. Whether or not we make it to the mountain top, whether we make it to the Promised Land is not for us to know, but I believe with all my heart it is for us to try. And when we get tired and when our faith starts to waiver, we can of course remember Dr. King's faith in us.

How being dog-tired that night, he left the Lorraine Motel and came here. I'm sure he would have liked a good night's sleep. I'm sure he thought Reverend Abernathy had done a fine job and there were so many good preachers there. But he felt called and he answered the call. As the Scripture tells us, when we are called, we must answer. Who will you send? Send me.

So here we are. Let us remember and return to the Well Springs of faith from which he drew. One should re-read Dr. King's last speech, just as we ask children to memorize the ""I have a dream"" speech. One should re-read that last speech. Be reminded of the prophet Amos who did shout and commend us to let justice run down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. One can remember the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ, who taught us to love our enemies. What an absurd teaching. At the time it was given, it was not even in the consciousness of humanity. Love

our enemies? Turn the other cheek? What was he talking about? And yet, that has been a prophetic call that has echoed throughout the generations. One that Dr. King took to heart.

And let us remember the faith and courage of Dr. King's brave widow. She returned to this city less than a week after his death to lead the march – the march for justice. She had not yet buried her husband and she was determined to carry on his work. With three of her children at her side, she did so with tens of thousands of people in solidarity with those striking workers.

Let us remember how Dr. King's faith connects us through time and place and history. The notes of "We shall overcome" were sung in Berlin as the wall came down, by Chinese students marching in Tiananmen Square, in South Africa at President Mandela's inauguration. I even had that song sung to me by a group of women, poor, desperately poor women in India, who sang it in Gujarati, their native tongue. From the prisoner of conscience in a Birmingham jail, to a prisoner of conscience on Robin Island, from the students sitting at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, to the students blocking the path of a tank in Beijing.

Whether we are oppressed by tyranny, poverty, war or discrimination, that faith, that determination to keep fighting, working, building and believing has and always will carry us forward as long as we remember and as long as we remain committed to fulfilling Dr. King's legacy and dream.

Thank you and God bless you.