

Celebrating Man and Law

Excerpts from remarks of Ohio Commerce Director Andre T. Porter delivered at Trinity Episcopal Church, Columbus, Ohio, during the Annual State of Ohio Dr. Martin Luther King Celebration, January 15, 2015.

*By Andre T. Porter
Ohio Director of Commerce*

We gather today to remember a man by remembering a law.

Not just any law, to be sure, but the Voting Rights Act that 50-years-ago addressed the rightful claim of a long disenfranchised people.

And not just any man, but The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King who was the 20th Century's preeminent voice of the American conscience.

Indeed, Dr. King was so grand in life and is so exalted in history that any speaker at such an occasion would struggle to make the chosen words of praise equal to the moment. I have struggled with that challenge today.

While the Voting Rights Act is profound in its purpose, it is not the law which has given me the special challenge of finding the right words to venerate it.

After all, the law is my chosen profession. I have studied the law.

I have been called to public service where my responsibilities have been to develop policies and regulations that promulgate our laws.

I have the duty of enforcing the law that keeps our citizens safe and keeps Ohio's commercial playing fields level.

Knowledge of the law and respect for it has been my sworn duty as a public official.

No, this speaking challenge was not the law, but the man behind the law.

I face the challenge of crafting a remembrance of Dr. King today, by first asking a question:

Without the Voting Rights Act and Dr. King, would I even be a public official with the duties I have outlined here?

We cannot know what might have been, we can know with certainty what was.

Today, I walk the same halls as all men. I am invited to the same table and often sit at the head of that table. My voice is measured by the strength of my ideas and my future holds an opportunity to serve all people.

That was far from any imagined reality that existed when Dr. King organized a nation to demand the approval of the Voting Rights Act. Dr. King began from a much different place.

First, Dr. King stood and a whole people learned to stand.

Dr. King was resolute and a whole people gained resolve.

He held out his hand in peace and people addressed injustice peacefully.

He acted with honor and a people learned to honor themselves.

And what was his demand?

Dr. King demanded that all people be given the equal rights of citizens.

The right he sought for us was the opportunity to do the work of citizens. Dr. King demanded that we be given a responsibility.

So today to honor the man and the law his leadership gained, we must remember to honor our responsibilities to our nation and to our fellow Americans.

We must speak for the disadvantaged and act beyond self-interest.

We should fear no man or his ideas nor use violent rhetoric or actions to advance our ideas.

We must accept the consequences of our own actions as we seek to impose consequences upon others.

We cannot see all politics as life or death wars. We must do the work of citizens even when it is unclear that our work will give us the result we seek when we seek it.

And, as citizens, we must honor all people even when we do not agree.

This is what I believe Dr. King taught and it is clear when you read or hear his words that he got his teachings from the one who would teach all.

So, to honor Dr. King and the Voting Rights Act of 1975, I can find only one word: Amen.