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## **MLK day: African Americans answering the call of military service**

Col. Allen delivered this speech on Jan. 14, 2010 at the US Army War College and Carlisle Barracks observation of Martin Luther King Day.

What a great day we have been given to serve together!

This is the 27th year since our nation has honored Dr. King with federal holiday on his birthday. You know of his achievements from the many observations that we have celebrated in our military. Many of you have heard Dr. King's speech and have focused on the chorus, "I have a dream." But, there is a short section at the beginning of that speech I want to share with you. This is what I believe inspired the dream, the movement, and the 1963 March on Washington. It is what compelled our nation to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and led to Dr. King's being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

How did this man of talent come to change a society and a nation?

Dr. King was born in Atlanta as a son of a minister. At an early age, he showed a passion and conviction of spirit that led him to the same vocation. He received a doctorate at the age of 26 from Boston University, and was on the path to be just as good a preacher as his father was. Through the course of his early ministry, his talent for oratory and leadership led him to a different path, one that he did not ask nor plan for, but to which he was called.

Today, I would like for us to reflect on those who, like Dr. King, have gone before us in the service of our country. Listen to this passage from the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 6 Verse 8. "And I heard the voice of the Lord saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am, Send me.'" This has been the venerable reply of many people who have been called to service, and, who in the face of adversity, stood up to be counted in the pursuit of a higher good. Each of us in this room has committed to such service to our nation.

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As Dr. King inevitably studied our American history, he would have known that many blacks had answered that call, and served nobly in the fight for freedom and justice. With each gathering like this one here today, we celebrate those selfless heroes AND the tradition of service to our country. In Boston, a brass plaque hangs on a small patch of bricks marking the location of the Boston Massacre of 1770. At that spot, Crispus Attucks, became the first martyr of the American Revolution. He was a black man, a runaway slave, who was at the forefront of America's quest for freedom. When called, he answered "Here I am, Send Me -- I will stand against tyranny and injustice. I will stand for liberty."

During the Civil War, with their freedom at stake, black Militiamen gave the Union forces the ability to defeat those who would oppress an entire race. This is the legacy of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment that was depicted in the movie "Glory." Those great men of our past each answered the call with "Here I am, Send Me--I will fight to end the oppression of my people; I will fight for the right to be free."

After the Civil War, black units were finally included in the Regular Army. Serving in the American West and on the Great Plains, they picked up the unforgettable name of Buffalo Soldiers. Among that group was the first Black cadet to graduate from West Point, LT Henry O. Flipper.

Forty-eight hours ago I was in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and I stood at the base of the beautiful statue that captures the spirit of those Buffalo Soldiers of the 9th and 10th Cavalry. Though it is not common knowledge, these all-black units kept Teddy Roosevelt from losing the Battle of San Juan Hill and helped Brig. Gen. John "Black Jack" Pershing pursue Pancho Villa in 1916.

Despite the evidence of heroic actions of black American soldiers, our published U.S. history reflected something to the contrary. Here is one study's conclusion:

As combat troops under modern war conditions, [negroes] never rose to the standard of white units even when well led by white officers. The negro officers were educationally and in character far inferior to the whites, and troops under negro officers were unfit for battle against an aggressive and active enemy.

This was from a 1925 study conducted by the Army War College.

On August 25th, 1941, black Americans were finally given a chance to prove their stuff in the Army Air Corps. The Tuskegee Airmen of the 332nd Fighter Group had the mission of escorting Allied bombers. In over 15 thousand sorties, they did not lose one bomber to enemy hostilities. Those black airmen accomplished this astounding feat with sheer skill, purpose of mind, and courage of conviction. They served proudly with the benefit of neither privilege nor courtesy. They answered the call by saying "Here we are, Send us--We will fight against injustice and for

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the liberty of others in foreign lands." Dr. King would have also known about Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Senior--the professor of Military Science at the Tuskegee Institute, who, in 1940, would become the first African-American to be selected and serve as a general officer.

In 2008, the U.S. Military celebrated a Diamond Anniversary--60 years since President Harry S. Truman signed the Executive Orders for the integration of the Armed Forces. This was one victory in our nation's internal battle against racism and stereotypes. We know that war is not yet won. As Dr. King once said: "If there is injustice for one, there is injustice for all."

We know well the names of black Soldier-leaders of the past who answered their personal calls in face of prejudice--Generals Chappie James and Ben O. Davis, Jr. were proud Tuskegee Airmen, as well as Vietnam-era Army Generals like Julius Becton, Roscoe Robinson, and Medal of Honor Winner Charles Rogers who carried the flag of those warriors from yesteryear.

These soldiers are among those African-Americans that Dr. King would have studied and watched. He would have noted their ability and talent, but that the opportunity to realize their potential was something that was not available to all black Americans. Hence, Dr. King continued his speech with this paragraph:

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in-so-far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check -- a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

Did Dr. King make a difference when he answered the call by not only saying "Here am I, Send me," but by also taking the risk of leadership?

The difference he made in my own life is clear. I grew up in Cleveland Ohio in the wake of the Civil Rights Act and experienced the riots in the summers of 1966 and 1968. When our nation was in turmoil, my family looked to Dr. King for spiritual direction, but more importantly, for hope.

I was a paperboy and the morning of April 5th, 1968, I delivered the Cleveland Plain Dealer, whose headline announced the assassination of Dr. King. While a bullet silenced the messenger, we know that it could not kill his message.

That following spring of 1969, I took a middle school trip from Cleveland to Atlanta to visit the Dr. King Center and gravesite. As a senior, I was selected to receive the first Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. award from Shaw High School.

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In the fall of 1972, I was contacted by a West Point liaison officer who was recruiting young men of color to join the officer ranks of our Army. My fellow military academy cadets and classmates were Cadets Dorian Anderson (Cdr, JTF-6; Human Resources Command), Lloyd Austin (Cdr, 10 Mtn Div; 18th ABN Corps), Ron Johnson (Deputy Chief, Army Corps of Engineers during Hurricane Katrina); and Tom Bostick (recently nominated for LTG to be the Army G-1).

During those four years at West Point, I met officers of proven ability and great promise. Captain Larry Ellis was a boxing instructor and would go on to command 1ST Armored Div and US Forces Command. Capt Larry Jordan was a history instructor; LTG Jordan became The Inspector General of the Army and my boss as the Deputy Commanding General, US Army Europe. And an Asian American, Major Eric Shinseki, taught English and would be a squadron commander supported by then-Capt Allen in Schweinfurt, Germany. General Shinseki would become Commander, US Army Europe and then later the Army Chief of Staff.

Within this collection of cadets and officers, our paths crossed several times over my 30-year career. Our opportunity to serve was directly attributable to the call that Dr. King answered. His response and actions enabled and inspired others to act for something beyond self and in the service of others. It is clear that Dr. King did make a difference in my life and the lives of other black service members.

He also made a difference in our nation when we consider names like Colin Powell, Condeleeza Rice, and Barack Obama. Each of those names brings to mind first intellect, talent, and character, then race. In response to a question asked of me during the recent presidential candidate nomination process, I told a close friend I did not think that America was ready to elect a woman or a black man as president. I was wrong.

During the campaign of 2008, Barack Obama was not defeated nor was he elected because of the color of his skin. Dr. King might nod his head and smile and offer that Senator Obama was judged on the content of his character and his ability to convey to the American people, "Here I am, Send me; I can lead this nation. I believe that change is possible for the betterment of all Americans."

In closing, I think that Dr. King would have us to look around and notice where there are still inequities--in education, in employment, in economic conditions and in health care. In that famous speech at the Lincoln Memorial he declared to us:

I say to you today my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

He would now ask what are we doing to make a difference, to make his dream--NO! our dream come true. Dr. King would press us and challenge us to act.

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Can you hear the call for service, above the noise of the world?

Over the past twenty years since the end of the Cold War, our Army has answered many calls of "Whom shall I send?" As an artillery lieutenant, I supported the 2nd Brigade of 3rd Infantry Division known as the "Send Me" Brigade. Our Army has conducted many deployments that you have been a part of in your career. You have deployed in support of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Restore Hope in Somalia, Restore Democracy in Haiti, and as part of the missions in Bosnia and in Kosovo. The nations of the former Yugoslavia were experiencing the same sorts of atrocities that drove the United States to fight in World War II--violations of the basic human rights of life and liberty.

We are still engaged in two prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Proudly, American efforts and U.S. military action have brought relief to many people of those regions. Today, as we read the papers and watch evening news programs, we know another situation has arisen in Haiti and that a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division will be on the ground in Haiti shortly. On any given day, our military may be called by our nation to Go and Serve in another land.

How do we know if that call is just?

Remember the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus said: "Blessed are the peace makers, for they will be called Sons of God."

Do we hear this call of "whom shall I send?" in our local community? Listen. You have the opportunity to serve as role models within our units and within this community. You are role models to our fellow service members, to your spouses and to our children. You are members of noble callings: military, civic leaders, teachers, and parents. You can answer this call by instilling values and demonstrating three very simple ways to live: Do the right thing, respect others, and do your best.

When called, What is your answer? Whom will you serve?

I will close with a passage from the Book of Joshua Chapter 24 Verse 15: "Choose for yourself this day whom you will serve."

By Col. Charles D. Allen

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