

**A MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY 2013**

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Celebrating the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—his faith, his courage, his humanity—is a time for one’s own self-reflection. This year, Dr. King’s birthday is the convergence of three milestone events marking America’s long march towards freedom and equality for all.

One hundred-and-fifty years ago this month, President Abraham Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, 1 January 1863, ending the oppression of human bondage. Booker T. Washington would later recall that the first time he heard of the proclamation, he was standing at his mother’s side as it was read aloud. In Washington’s words:

*“After the reading we were told that we were all free, and could go when and where we pleased. My mother . . . leaned over and kissed her children . . . tears of joy ran down her cheeks. She explained to us . . . that this was the day for which she had been so long praying, but fearing that she would never live to see.”*

One hundred years later, America—and in time, the world—would witness the delivery of the most powerful speech of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dr. King’s *“I Have A Dream”* sermon was delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on 28 August 1963. Before more than 250,000 supporters, Dr. King began his remarks by invoking Abraham Lincoln:

*“Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.”* And then, Dr. King went on to share his dream of racial equality, where *“one day [our] Nation will live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal. One day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight.”*

Though Dr. King’s birthday is 15 January, the Nation sets aside the third Monday of each January as a national holiday in celebration of his life. This year, the third Monday falls on 21 January—next Monday.

21 January is also Inauguration Day—the *second* inauguration of America’s *first* African-American President. So, our celebration this year honors the memory of Dr. King as we bear witness to one of the world’s most significant political moments—the inauguration of an American President. And the backdrop to all of this is Abraham Lincoln’s hand in signing a proclamation that declared freedom for an entire oppressed people. There is no more fitting, no more proper image, than the convergence of this solemn ceremony and this celebration of the life of one of the great men in American history.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. taught us that we all have the power to make the Nation stronger and better—a powerful lesson for Americans of every faith and color. His holiday is a time for self-reflection and an opportunity to re-dedicate ourselves to the principles of citizenship and proud and selfless service to our community and to our Nation.

Eric K. Shinseki