

WITNESS for JUSTICE

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‘Where Do We Go From Here?’

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The start of each New Year is a time to look back and look forward. Many of us make New Year’s resolutions to be healthier, spend more time with those we love, and focus on the important things. The upcoming State of the Union speech is not unlike a New Year’s resolution for our nation. It is a time when the President looks back and looks forward, outlining a vision for the government policy in the year to come. On January 28, I’m guessing we’ll hear similar hopes to be healthier (economy), spend time with those we love (diplomacy), and focus on the important things (jobs, jobs, and more jobs).

But what if instead of dwelling on the politically possible, this year’s State of the Union reflected our nation’s true priorities? What if it addressed head on the deep challenges we face as a nation? What if, in addition to awkward periods of partisan applause at our success, it was also punctuated with grim faces and even tears at our failures? What if it addressed not only our economy, but a commitment to correct the growing income disparity and inequality that plagues our nation? What if it put a human face on our inhumane immigration policy or the racial inequalities in both our overpopulated prisons and underfunded public education system? What if it called out as sinful the fact that our nation is responsible for half the world’s military expenditures, spending more money on the Pentagon than on social programs?

One person who was never afraid to face and articulate our nation’s real hopes and challenges was Martin Luther King Jr. I can’t help but imagine what it would be like if the State of the Union was given on MLK day instead. How would it change? A King-inspired State of the Union speech would unapologetically address the “triple evils” of poverty, racism, and militarism in our nation. It would alert us to what Dr. King called the “fierce urgency of now,” in which inequality is widespread, people go hungry, racism and segregation persist, public institutions are in crisis, and diplomatic efforts with Iran are

God is still speaking,
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being undermined by Congress while troops in Afghanistan remain a decade later. The question of “Where do we go from here?” would be met with the only two alternative futures for our nation: “...chaos or community.”

Although the State of the Union speech will raise address critical issues and offer a barometer for the political discourse in Washington, I am skeptical that it will reflect the true state of our nation. For that I suggest that you read the writings of Martin Luther King Jr. One of his timeless reflections includes the observation that “a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” His words, though written more than forty years ago, continue to be as relevant for our nation now as they were in 1967.¹

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper and Row Publishing Inc., 1967), p. 219

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