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21st Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Breakfast

As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, Pentagon Dining Room, Washington, DC, Thursday, January 12, 2006

Thank you. It is a pleasure to join you today.

A great deal can happen in any calendar year, but it is important to note one event that occurred in this past year.

This is our first Martin Luther King breakfast since the death of Rosa Parks. It is appropriate to me to take a moment to reflect on the tremendous impact she had on our country.

Tens of thousands of mourners gathered to pay tribute to her at memorial services across the country -- in Michigan, here in Washington, in the south. Some of the mourners had famous names, but most were ordinary citizens -- people from different backgrounds, different races, and cultures.

Rosa Parks was the first woman and only the 31st to lie in state in the rotunda of the United States Capitol. It says something special -- and I think hopeful -- about our nation that resting in the same place as had Lincoln, Kennedy, and Reagan was the modest, but marvelous seamstress from Montgomery, Alabama -- surrounded by the symbols of our great democracy and the tears and prayers of a grateful nation.

For a moment, that scene offered all who saw it, in person or on television, a glimpse of the "dream" that Martin Luther King, Jr. suffered and died for -- and the "dream" we are still struggling to make a reality for every American.

Recently, I was told something about our country that you might find interesting. It seems the United States is probably home to more monuments to foreign liberators than any other country in the world. Down the road from where we are today are statues of India's Mahatma Gandhi, along with fathers of Czech and Ukrainian independence. In New York are monuments to Italian revolutionaries and a series of Latin American liberators.

Each of them, like Dr. Martin Luther King, saw their nation not as it had been or was, but as a vision of what it could be, and what it should be. Each believed freedom to be, in Dr. King's words, not only "the sacred heritage of our nation" but "the eternal will of God."

All of us who had the honor of meeting him, as I did in the 1960's, as I did as a young Congressman, while working on civil rights legislation, were forever affected by the gentle power of his vision, commitment, and his courage and certainly his perseverance.

He saw this nation through that ugly era of church burnings and lynchings. An era of less dramatic, but equally insidious, moments when:

- Race determined where one sat at a diner, in a theater, or on a bus;

- A Jackie Robinson could not stay at the same hotel as his teammates;
- A Ray Charles, touring with his band, had to go to the back door of restaurants to get a sandwich; and
yes
- A quiet women too tired to move to the back of the bus after a hard day's work ignited a movement -- with a grace and dignity that would turn her into a symbol that would accord her, upon her death, the same honor we give to Presidents.

Dr. King helped America come to terms with the shame of its past, to find a way to move beyond it. He understood that our nation could never be a moral force in the world as long as it denied the promise of its founding to its own people.

Because he recognized the America's true meaning and mission, and worked to guide his fellow citizens towards it, the United States is today a prouder and stronger and a better nation.

Every decisive chapter in the history of freedom has within it an epic figure -- whose righteousness and power transcend time and place to become a symbol of humanity's struggle against the sin of subjugation.

And today, we thank providence for the freedom Dr. King envisioned, the example he set, and the history he wrote for the ages.

It falls to us to tell his story. And if we fulfill that mission, and live his legacy, I believe that one-day citizens in other free nations will walk past monuments in their cities that will have been erected in honor of that great American liberator, Martin Luther King, Jr. And that they and their children will learn of a hero and patriot, a man who had been to the mountaintop, and in the words of Scripture, "walked in the truth." May God bless you and may God bless our wonderful country.

Thank you very much.