

Durham, N.C. - It's wonderful to start this year's Martin Luther King observance at North Carolina Central as the university embarks on its second century of service!

I had hoped today to have the welcome duty of introducing my friend and colleague, John Lewis. John and I were first elected in the same year, 1986, and began our service together. He was probably the best-known member of our class and has distinguished himself further over these 24 years, serving on the Ways and Means Committee and in the Democratic leadership as Senior Deputy Whip.

NCCU made a wise choice in inviting John Lewis, and I hope you will still be able to welcome him some day when snow and ice in Atlanta are not a problem! No one alive today can speak more authoritatively about the life and legacy of Martin Luther King than John Lewis. For him it is not only a matter of historical proximity and knowledge, but also shared vision, inspiration, and leadership of the movement. As chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, John was an architect of and keynote speaker at the March on Washington in 1963. And then in 1965 he led over 600 peaceful protestors across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, where they were attacked and beaten by state troopers. This "Bloody Sunday" shocked the conscience of the nation and led directly to passage of the Voting Rights Act.

John frequently visits campuses like this one—he has been awarded over 50 honorary degrees—and last week he told me how much he was looking forward to visiting Durham. Next month President Obama plans to award him our county's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Today I want to begin, as I know John would, with a word about the horrific events in Tucson last weekend. You may have heard his moving words on television about our colleague, Representative Gabrielle Giffords. John is often called upon for words of wisdom or comfort in times of crisis because of the depth of his experience, character, and insight. But all of us were left grasping for words to express the shock, outrage, and sorrow that we felt at the deaths, the injuries, and the torn fabric of our democracy. Gabrielle Giffords is a dedicated and effective member of Congress, and she was struck down doing her most basic duty, engaging and communicating with her constituents.

Beyond the shock and outrage, I believe that some reflection and soul searching are called

for--on the responsibility each of us has, whether as an elected official or citizen, to be respectful and civil in our dealings with one another and as we advocate in the public square. President Obama stressed this very strongly last night. We do not yet know what might have motivated or influenced the deranged would-be assassin, but we do know the climate in Rep. Giffords' district was toxic—smashed windows at her office, bomb threats, an opposition campaign that used violent rhetoric. Disturbed people often act literally on what others see as metaphor. So as we advocate—and in our democracy, we have not only a right but an obligation to speak out for what we believe in—we should do so responsibly, with civility and restraint. As John Lewis said in a column he wrote after the shooting, "Words that allude to violence, words that demonize our colleagues and question the integrity of their opinions can be the only approval the angry or unhinged will need to act."

We also need to reflect on how this tragedy could have been prevented, or the destruction limited. Obviously, this troubled young man should have been identified and given mental health treatment, but where does that responsibility lie? How can we make certain such individuals cannot and do not obtain weapons? And why should anyone be able to purchase a 30-round magazine, the only purpose of which is to mow people down? I hope we can reflect and act on such questions in a reasoned way, and that this tragedy does not merely become fodder for the talk shows and for political posturing. This is potentially an occasion for us to come together in sympathy and solidarity and to take steps that might make our country safer and better.

As the President said, "The loss of these wonderful people should make every one of us strive to be better. To be better in our private lives, to be better friends and neighbors and coworkers and parents. And if, as has been discussed in recent days, their death helps usher in more civility in our public discourse, let us remember it is not because a simple lack of civility caused this tragedy -- it did not -- but rather because only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to the challenges of our nation in a way that would make them proud."

Ironically, this tragedy occurs on the eve of our Martin Luther King observances, which remind us of another assassination and, beyond that, a series of assassinations in troubled times. It was the awful event of April 4, 1968 that led to the holiday we now observe, an occasion of solemn remembrance and resolve which each year we hope and believe can make us and our country better. "As we try to understand ...the horrors in Tucson," Al Sharpton wrote earlier this week, "it is not lost on me that the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's birth is fast approaching. I hope that we can heal in this moment rather than just take sides and assign blame. Although his house was bombed, he was stabbed, and he lived under constant threats, Dr King never pointed his finger at others. He sought to be a healer rather than exacerbate tensions." Sharpton then went on to describe the soul searching that he personally has felt led to undertake.

So Dr. King's words and example are still helpful to us as we confront the tragedy in Tucson and think about how we should respond. This morning I want to go a step further and remind us of the broader context in which Dr. King viewed our public life and the place he assigned power and love in our common endeavors. I take my text from his last presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967. The proper understanding of power, he says, is that it is sought and exercised not just for its own sake, but as a means to achieve our purposes:

One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites—polar opposites--- so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love. We've got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our time.

This is the framework, I believe, in which the political traumas and troubles of our time need to be placed. We must harness power to the imperatives of justice, and we must make love real in the kind of community we build. Our continuing challenge is to construct a strong and reliable connection between power and leadership on the one hand and our deepest values, "love implementing the demands of justice," on the other.

We have had too much of "reckless and abusive," indifferent and unaccountable power in our country. We cannot simply relegate love, justice, our deepest values to the realms of advocacy and protest, as important as advocacy and protest can be. We must link-up love and power.

People of conscience need to get practical, yes political, and put our shoulders to the wheel. The realms of power need to be made responsive and accountable. That is what elections—and politics between elections—should be about in a democracy. It is what Martin Luther King Jr. stood for. Today is the day to clarify our understanding and steady our resolve for the challenges that lie before us.

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