

**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE JAMES N. MATTIS  
MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY OBSERVANCE  
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 25, 2017 – 1300  
PENTAGON AUDITORIUM, WASHINGTON D.C.**

Thank you Mike [Rhodes] – and thanks for your leadership at the Pentagon for many years. You’ve been instrumental in fostering an atmosphere of harmony and trust as we transition to a new Administration. So thank you again.

Leaders of the Department and Ladies and Gentlemen, good afternoon and thanks for being here. General Harris, thank you for your years of leadership and it’s good to be alongside you to pause and remind ourselves of some of what we’re fighting for.

It’s appropriate that my first chance to speak with a large group here at the Pentagon since taking the oath of office is to observe Martin Luther King Day with you.

I’m really proud of our Department and our military that I joined in 1969 – but the Department’s reputation is based on more than just the years I’ve spent...

Last Friday night, soon after taking the oath, I sent a message to the Department. I wrote, “Our nation need only look to you, the uniformed and civilian members of the Department and your families, to see the fundamental unity of our country.”

Anyone who’s taken the oath has experienced that unity. We’ve experienced the co-equal commitment of all hands and all ranks to one common mission – a mission that calls upon all hands to strive together, to fight together, and to watch out for each other.

Today we observe the legacy of a man who called upon Americans to strive together and to fight together, and to do their duty in the long struggle for equality and Civil Rights.

In our Nation’s history, our military has often served as an example to the American people of unity and strength; of how a diverse group of people can be motivated by austere conditions and the grim realities of the battlefield to come together as equals.

As far back as November, 1805 – in the first decades of our experiment in democracy – two young Army officers led a special unit – the Corps of Discovery – across the harsh landscape of the Pacific Northwest.

They arrived at the Pacific Ocean and faced months of cold and deprivation before the snows melted and they would be able to return east. In this perilous situation, the unit was confronted with the choice of where to build a winter camp. The consequences of a bad decision could have been severe, and most likely fatal.

Young Meriwether Lewis and William Clark put the matter of whether to cross the perilous mouth of the Columbia River to all hands. The unit included a slave named York and a Native American woman named Sacagawea.

For the first time in the history of our Republic, among the members of this isolated patrol far from home, a black man, a Native American, white men and a woman voted as equals with everyone else.

They voted to cross that terrible water – and the expedition survived the winter. They returned east to report back to Commander-in-Chief Thomas Jefferson. They accomplished their mission to find the best route to the Pacific, and it was an all hands effort.

Military service in America is a touchstone for American patriots of all races, genders, and creeds. The men and women of the Department of Defense – military and civilian – reflect the diverse and selfless character of our national defense.

Our Armed Forces are stronger today because of the perseverance of Dr. King and so many others in this country who have fought for Civil Rights and equality for all. And we can trace our roots back to an Army patrol in 1805 when we listened to our better angels. On this day of action, we are inspired to continue being a model for our Nation.

Thank you all for being here and thank you for helping defend our Nation.