

Loretta Lynch Took One Last Shot at Everyday Americans

Attorney General Loretta Lynch used the occasion of Martin Luther King Jr. Day to deliver her final address prior to the change of administrations on Jan. 20.

She also specifically chose the location for that speech—the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., where Dr. King gave the eulogy for four African American girls killed when the Ku Klux Klan set off a bomb—to set the stage for the message she would deliver: that racism and bigotry are found everywhere in America still today.

“I know that while our accomplishments should make us proud, they must not make us complacent. We cannot stop. We have to work,” she said. “I know that in our pursuit of a brighter future, we still face headwinds. We still face oppositions. We see it. Waves of hatred, waves of intolerance and injustice that are still blowing in this country, and they seem to grow stronger the more that we achieve.”

Oh, and President-elect Donald Trump will plunge the nation into darkness, fear, and even more bigotry.

“And I have seen the concerns that the voting booth will be moved out of reach, that our hearts will close along with our borders, that a prayer in a different tongue or posture will place one at deadly risk,” she said. “I have seen the fear that, with the turn of the electoral wheel, so many of us will be seen as children of a lesser God.”

Here’s the entire transcript of the speech:

I am delighted to be back in Birmingham. It is a pleasure to be here, and it is an honor to stand before you in this beautiful and historic sanctuary, whose significance to our

nation's history was formally recognized just last week by President Obama, who designated 16th St. Baptist Church as part of the new Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument. I want to congratulate you on this high honor, and I share your joy that 16th St. Baptist—along with Kelly Ingram Park—will be preserved and protected for generations to come, ensuring that Americans will always know of Birmingham's heroic contribution to the civil rights movement. They will also know that this is a living monument, just as this is an active and vibrant church, honoring the past but also very much working on the issues of today.

Standing in this house of worship reminds me of Jacob's words in Exodus (sic): "Surely the Lord is in this place." Generations of men and women have found the Lord in 16th St. Baptist Church. They have come here in times of joy and seasons of sorrow. They have come here to lament and to praise; to mourn and to celebrate; to bury and to baptize. They have come here inspired by the unseen promise of God's kingdom—that "every valley shall be raised up, and every hill made low." And more than that, they have come here to work—to do the hard and often dangerous work of pushing America to make good on its pledge "that all men are created equal."

Today, we come here to celebrate the brief life and enduring legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., who labored tirelessly to obey the Word of God and to advance the cause of freedom. More importantly, we gather to renew our commitment to Dr. King's work in our own time: the work of creating a society that respects the rights and affirms the dignity of all people, regardless of color or creed, gender or ethnicity. That is the dream for which Martin Luther King Jr. gave his life. And it is the ideal towards which we must continue striving today.

No place could be more fitting for this solemn occasion than

16th St. Baptist Church. Like a proud handful of places in our country, 16th St. Baptist Church has not only borne witness to the progress of freedom in our history. It has also borne the costs of that progress and been most fittingly recognized now as a monument to the enormous sacrifices by which we have expanded and enlarged our liberty over the centuries. It reminds us, as few other places in our nation can, that freedom is not free, and that it is up to us—here and now—to ensure that the triumphs of the past remain intact for Americans of the future.

Some of those triumphs would not have happened without the contributions of this church. When Dr. King launched his landmark Birmingham campaign in the spring of 1963, activists assembled at 16th Street to organize, to sing freedom songs, to declare that they would not be turned back by prejudice. And because of what happened here in Birmingham in 1963, the nation's conscience was awakened to the harsh facts of segregation. Because of what happened here, the nation could no longer ignore the reality of unjust laws enforced by police dogs and fire hoses—those graphic images showing a government literally turning on its own people. And ultimately, because of what happened here, our nation took its most significant steps towards equality since the end of the Civil War by passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

These landmark achievements literally changed the face of our nation. Thus does Birmingham embody not just the pain of the past but also the power of hope for the future. When I was born, it would have been unimaginable to think that an African-American woman could even sit on a jury, much less serve as the nation's chief law enforcement officer. But because of what happened here in Birmingham, I stand before you today as attorney general of the United States, serving in the cabinet of the first African-American president of the United States. That progress is real, it is remarkable,

and it should be a source of pride and hope for all Americans.

And yet we cannot take that progress for granted. We have come a long way in our struggle to build a society worthy of the promises set forth in our founding documents. But there is no doubt that we still have a long way to go. Fifty years after the civil rights movement finally put an end to so much of the state-sanctioned discrimination and the regime of racial violence that terrorized our country for decades, we still see our fellow Americans targeted simply because of who they are—not only for their race, but for their religion, sexual orientation and gender identity as well. Fifty years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, we see new attempts to erect barriers to the voting booth. And 50 years after this very church was bombed for its role in the civil rights movement—an unspeakable act of malice that killed four little girls—we see anti-Semitic slurs painted on the walls of synagogues. We see bomb threats and arson directed at mosques. And as we stand here today in this holy place, we cannot help but remember the tragic shooting that claimed nine innocent lives during Bible study at Mother Emanuel AME in Charleston in 2015.

I am proud to say that under the Obama administration, the Department of Justice has worked tirelessly to meet these challenges. Thanks in part to the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act that President Obama signed in 2009, the department has convicted more defendants on hate crimes charges during this administration than at any other time in our history—because no American should feel threatened because of what they look like, where they worship or whom they love. We are working closely with state and local law enforcement agencies to improve their relationships with the communities they serve, particularly communities of color. When necessary, we have investigated departments for unconstitutional practices and policies, and

we have worked with them to enact vital reforms—because every American deserves to see law enforcement as a guardian, not a threat. And although the Supreme Court’s decision in Shelby County has significantly curtailed our ability to enforce the Voting Rights Act, that does not mean we are standing still while states build new obstacles to the polling place. We are vigorously challenging discriminatory state laws in federal courts, recently winning key victories in North Carolina and Texas that preserved thousands of Americans’ right to participate in our democracy—because too many have given too much to ensure that every eligible citizen can cast his or her ballot on election day.

I could not be prouder of the Justice Department’s record of achievement over the last eight years. I know that we—along with our colleagues across the federal government and at the state and local levels—have measurably improved the lives of countless Americans. But I also know that our work is far from finished. I know that while our accomplishments should make us proud, they must not make us complacent. I know that in our pursuit of a brighter future, we still face the headwinds of hatred, intolerance and injustice—winds that often seem to grow stronger the more we achieve.

There is no doubt that we face real and difficult obstacles in our ongoing quest for a more just and united future. But if there is one lesson we can draw from the life of Martin Luther King, it is that adversity is not a cause for despair. It is a call to action.

That was Dr. King’s message when he came to 16th St. Baptist Church on Sept. 18th, 1963. Exactly three weeks earlier, he had stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and proclaimed to the world that he had a dream— “a dream that one day, this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed.” On that day, as Dr. King stood in the shadow of Lincoln, his dream must have seemed within reach,

a glimpse of it visible in the diverse and jubilant crowd of thousands who had thronged the nation's capital to affirm that in the United States, all people are indeed equal. On that day, Dr. King proclaimed his faith that "... we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood." And on that day, his faith was vindicated by the scene before him. The strains of the symphony must have sounded sweet indeed.

Three short weeks later, Dr. King came to 16th St. Baptist to address a very different crowd for a very different reason. He was here just days after a bomb exploded beneath the steps of this church, killing Addie Mae Collins, Carol Denise McNair, Cynthia Diane Wesley and Carole Robertson. And I want to note that we are joined today by former U.S. Attorney Doug Jones and Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Pose—soon to be acting U.S. attorney—who worked tirelessly to successfully prosecute two of the perpetrators of that heinous bombing more than 40 years after it happened. They represent the very best of the Department of Justice, and we all owe them a debt of gratitude.

As Dr. King stood in this damaged church on that day in 1963 and looked out on a group of bereaved parents and grieving congregants, his dream must have seemed far more distant and fragile than it had from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. His faith in the American creed must have rested on far more precarious ground than it had on that bright and hopeful day in Washington.

And yet even in the wake of such senseless violence—in the midst of such profound sorrow—Dr. King refused to surrender his dream or abandon his faith. He drew a powerful lesson from the death of four innocent girls: "Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream." And he went on, "In spite of the darkness of this hour," he said, "We must not despair. We must not become bitter."

Five short years later, he would lay dying, felled by an assassin's bullet. Those were dark days.

If any of you have visited the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, you have seen the beautiful marker installed just below the balcony where he was killed. And you have read its inscription, which quotes from Genesis the words of those plotting to murder Joseph: "They said one to another, 'Behold, here cometh the dreamer. ... Let us slay him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.'"

I know that we are in difficult days now. Many worry that Dr. King's dream—and all that has flowed from it—is at risk like never before. In my travels, I have seen the disconnect between the forces of our government and the communities we serve; I have seen the concerns that the voting booth will be moved out of reach, that our hearts will close along with our borders, that a prayer in a different tongue or posture will place one at risk. And I have seen the fear that once again we will let a distinction without a difference govern our view of our fellow Americans rather than what is in their hearts. And I have seen the fear that, with the turn of the electoral wheel, so many of us will be seen as children of a lesser God. I have seen all that.

But let me tell you what else I've seen. I have seen people speaking out in the time-honored tradition that has made this country stronger. In their cries for justice, I have heard the belief that it can be attained.

In our law enforcement partners' quest for support, I have heard the guardian's call for tools to calm the waters, to comfort those who fear and know and understand the people they serve.

I have seen young people—the heart of any movement—determined to help strengthen their communities and serve a cause greater than themselves. I have seen them,

even though barely old enough to vote, step forward to serve their country.

I have seen our LGBTQ friends and family members, who know for the first time that their government cares for their well-being.

I have seen the proud faces of immigrants as they raised their hands to take the oath of citizenship.

I have seen the Stonewall Inn—once a place of persecution and prejudice, now a National Monument—and I have seen the newest Smithsonian museum on the Mall, where at last, black history is celebrated as American history.

I have seen my colleagues at the Department of Justice, who work all day and well into the night on behalf of people they may never know, in places they may never see.

Above all, I have seen all of you: men and women of goodwill who love this country, who believe in its promise and who are working to fulfill its founding creed. I have seen your hopes and, yes, your dreams. I have seen your faith, and I have seen your works.

That is what I have seen. Yes, these are challenging times, and we undoubtedly have more challenges to come. But many of our greatest strides, in equal rights, in human rights, have come after heartbreaking loss. This hallowed ground is a testament to that. And this has never been easy.

Over 200 years ago, we decided what kind of a country we wanted to be. Our way forward has not always been on the path called straight. It has instead been characterized by twists and turns and sometimes outright reversals. But we are Americans, and we have pushed ever onward. And what we have learned from all our challenges is not that our values are not true and good but that every generation must commit to them and work to make them real for the challenges of

their time.

My time as the attorney general of these United States is drawing to a close. But I have also seen that the cause of justice is greater than any one of us –it spans any temporal bounds that we would place on it. It transcends the work of a single administration, or even of a generation.

And if it comes to pass that we do enter a period of darkness, let us remember—that is when dreams are best made. So let us see—what shall become of Dr. King’s dream? The Lord has already wrought a miracle by bringing us this far, and “I don’t believe He brought me this far to leave me.”

What shall become of his dream? We shall pick it up and carry it forward. We will not shirk, we will not falter, we will not fail.

What shall become of his dream? We shall take this newest monument and make it a testament not just to what happened before but to what we do today.

What shall become of his dream? We will make it ours, and we will extend it as a bridge to all those who stand on the outside of democracy looking in.

And when our time comes, we shall pass the dream on to those who are already raising their hand and to those yet to come. So that the arc of the moral universe continues straight and true—continues towards justice.

I want to thank you for hosting me today in your beautiful and historic sanctuary. I want to thank you for all that you have done and continue to do to advance Dr. King’s dream in our time. It has been the privilege of a lifetime serving as your attorney general, and I want you to know that as move on to what Justice [Louis] Brandeis called “the highest public office in the land—that of private citizen,” I will be standing alongside all of you as we lift up this work.

And I can't wait to see what shall become of all our dreams.
Thank you. {eoa}