

WASHINGTON, DC – House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer (MD) delivered remarks this afternoon at the MLK Memorial Project Foundation Congressional Leadership Awards Lunch, where he received the Defender of Democracy award. Below are his remarks as prepared for delivery:

"I am honored to receive this award, and to join with you in support of the hard work that will bring a Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial to the hallowed ground of the National Mall. It will be a great day when Dr. King, not far from where he delivered his famous speech on the Mall in 1963, is honored among our nation's founders. He belongs there, because the Civil Rights Movement he led is rightly seen as a re-founding of our nation: as a turning point when America chose to live more fully by the meaning of its founding ideals.

"A place on the National Mall is the closest America comes to offering something like secular sainthood. If Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln deserve that recognition, Dr. King does, as well. But as we honor his legacy, let us be absolutely sure to remember: those people we treat as saints today were so often treated with anger, suspicion, and contempt in their own time. And that is no less true for Dr. King and the movement he led.

"In 1964, Dr. King spoke at a national church convention in St. Louis; while many of the delegates applauded his call for civil disobedience, some sat on their hands. Soon after, the convention debated a resolution expressing support for the civil rights struggle; it failed, and in protest, one of the delegates—Federal Judge Thurgood Marshall—walked out.

"This is how the local paper treated that decision in an editorial: 'Here is a Federal judge, the very embodiment of our law, acting as though he had turned in his judicial robes for a pair of sneakers and a C.O.R.E. sweatshirt. The spectacle is ludicrous and not a little hypocritical. This is a man who sits upon the United States Circuit Court of Appeals asking his church to encourage followers who violate selected laws 'for reasons of conscience'...an invitation to anarchy!'

"And we all know that those words, surprising as they sound today, pale in comparison to the invective, violence, and even federal spying directed towards the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. Today, we recognize that movement as the common heritage of every one of us—but it hardly looked that way at the time.

"I think the lesson is clear: when we look for good guidance in our own time, we will not find it in words that comfort us, but in words that challenge us. We will find it in the words of men and women like Dr. King: people capable of saying, as he did, 'True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar—it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.' Those we will honor tomorrow have difficult, uncomfortable things to say to us today.

"Dr. King preached racial reconciliation. But part of his legacy is the fact that in his voluminous writings, speeches, sermons, and letters, each of us here will find even now, decades later, something that still challenges our conscience. As he takes his rightful place on the Mall, it could be easy to forget that part of his legacy—which is why it will take our special effort to remember it."

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