

On Monday, January 17, we will commemorate the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a minister, a civil rights leader, a father, a Nobel Laureate. Dr. King led the fight to reform America's ideas of equality and civil rights – and to dispel the notion that the American dream was only limited to Americans of a certain color or background.

Dr. King understood the right to vote was invaluable to every American citizen. Without it, individuals truly have no voice in our nation's government. He told us, "there is nothing more dangerous than to build a society, with a large segment of people in that society who feel that they have no stake in it; who feel that they have nothing to lose." But as we observe Dr. King's birthday, we are acutely aware that the stake that he was talking about was more than the right to vote. He also was talking about the right that all Americans share – the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

This year, as in past years, at the beginning of March, I will travel to Alabama with my friend, Rep. John Lewis, to join in commemorating the infamous "Bloody Sunday" civil rights march that took place in Selma, Alabama on March 7, 1965.

On "Bloody Sunday," a group of peaceful marchers were walking to the end of town to protest the many methods employed in the South to prevent African Americans from registering to vote. The more than 500 marchers were met by Alabama state troopers and Sheriff's deputies wielding clubs, bullwhips, rubber hoses wrapped with barbed wire and tear gas.

Footage of "Bloody Sunday" was shown on television, causing a national outcry. Several days later, President Lyndon Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress to propose what would become the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The legislation was signed into law 40 year ago on August 6, 1965, and is widely credited with allowing African Americans the right to register to vote.

The bravery of these men and women who risked their lives to guarantee themselves, their families and all Americans the right to vote, serves to remind us of the debt that many citizens have paid for our civil liberties today.

The pilgrimage I will take to Selma is an uplifting reminder that men and women of courage and character can change hearts and change a nation. It is vital to recall our past as we strive to

improve our future.

And, so to does the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., call on all Americans to remember those who suffered in the past for the right to vote. The battle for justice and equality that played out in Selma in 1965 has yet to be won. We must act to ensure that every American has an equal opportunity to have their voice heard by voting in free and fair elections.

The vast progress of the civil rights movement will continue to endure. However, the utmost potential of these advancements is yet to be actualized. Discrimination is no longer safe in the ranks of social, political and legal realms, but its shadow of poverty, ignorance, and injustice remain. “They are our enemies, not our fellow man, not our neighbor,” said President Lyndon B. Johnson at the end of his voting rights speech in 1964. “And these enemies too—poverty, disease, and ignorance—we shall overcome.”

Our nation has provided tremendous opportunity to its people, but for many, these opportunities did not come without equally tremendous obstacles. However, thanks to visionary men and women of extraordinary courage and conviction who fought to change the course of history, we have made progress.

Today we must redouble our commitment to the America envisioned by Dr. King nearly four decades ago. We must continue to work to a better end, so that in the years to come, every citizen's voice will be heard fairly at the ballot box; every person can walk the street without fear or harassment; and every individual will be able to pursue the American dream, without obstacles of poverty or bigotry. We have not yet reached the Promised Land, but it is up to us to ensure that America achieves the full measure of its promise.