

As we observe the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I hope that Americans will use this opportunity to recommit themselves to service in their communities, in honor of a man who gave his life to service.

Today, when Dr. King is spoken of with such high praise, it is important to remember how often in his lifetime he was distrusted, sharply criticized, and even hated. In 1963, when he was arrested for civil disobedience in Birmingham, Alabama, he was called an “outside agitator.” *You aren’t from here*, he was told.

*You don’t understand Birmingham. What do you know about our problems?*

In his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King responded that he was just at home there as he was anywhere in America. He wrote: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial ‘outside agitator’ idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.”

The provincialism Dr. King spoke of is poisonous in times of great injustice. It is one of injustice’s most powerful friends. It tells us that the struggles of a fellow citizen of another region or race are no concern of ours. It tells me that my neighbor’s problems are no problem of mine. It tears down our moral imaginations and leaves each of us isolated.

That insight was at the center of his life’s work, as he challenged all Americans to broaden their moral obligations to one another as citizens of a free nation. Dr. King urged the oppressed to forswear violence, and to meet hate with love; and he called on the prosperous and comfortable to make common cause with the suffering of their fellow citizens. It has always been a difficult message, then and now; but even though it will always be associated with a time of social transformation more than a half-century ago, its relevance is permanent.

And in the hardest times, it is never more tempting. These are hard times; and when our

neighbors need us most, when our mutuality is most evident, that is exactly when it is most tempting to write some of our fellow citizens out of our nation's story, to draw the lines separating "insider" from "outsider"—and "real America" from "unreal America"—more and more narrowly.

That temptation is by no means unique to our country. But what we can be proud of—what is so distinctively American—is the character of the movement and the man who called us to overcome our narrowness. At a time of anger and fear—and of tremendous possibility—Dr. King called us to live out a shared destiny and a common dream. That is why he was hated then. And that is why he is honored—and needed—now.