



Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein On the Death of Coretta Scott King

January 31, 2006

Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) introduced the following floor statement today in memory of Coretta Scott King, widow of Civil Rights Activist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“Mr. President, I rise today to pay tribute to the First Lady of the Civil Rights movement – Coretta Scott King. Mrs. King, the widow of the late Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., dedicated her life to sharing Dr. King’s quest for social justice and peace.

Although one cannot say enough about her lifelong commitment to the cause of racial and economic equality, it is important to also note that Coretta Scott King was a visionary for women’s rights on her own merit. She was the first woman to deliver the Class Day address at Harvard, and the first woman to preach at a statutory service at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. And Mrs. King served as a liaison to international peace and justice organizations even before Dr. King took a public stand in 1967 against United States intervention in the Vietnam War.

As we mourn the passing of Coretta Scott King, we are once again reminded of her quiet and resolute compassion for others. As she once remarked, and continued to demonstrate throughout her long life, Dr. King’s dream was equally hers as well. ‘I didn’t learn my commitment from Martin. We just converged at a certain time.’

Together, their fearless commitment to the Civil Rights movement shaped and inspired the revolutionary social changes in the United States over the last half-century.

Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King were first vaulted to the national stage during the Montgomery bus boycott. Led by Dr. King, the 1955 boycott lasted nearly 13 months and truly ignited the nation’s civil rights movement.

The boycott led to the Supreme Court questioning the legality of the Jim Crow law that mandated the discrimination of African-Americans on the public bus system. And on November 13, 1956, in the landmark case *Browder v. Gayle*, the Supreme Court banned segregation on buses. It was truly a remarkable victory for the cause of freedom and equality.

Throughout the turbulent decades of the 1950’s and 60’s, Dr. King’s vision helped the nation form a new and better understanding of itself, one that celebrates its diverse nature and strengthens its commitment to the principals of equality and justice.

Yet one cannot simply overlook the passion and commitment of Mrs. King as her own individual. Throughout her long life, Mrs. King served as an inspirational presence around the world for the values of equality and peace.

Coretta Scott was born April 27, 1927, the middle of three children born to Obadiah and Bernice Scott. She grew up in the two-room house her father built on land that had been owned by the family for three generations. Her exposure to the injustices of segregation were formed early on, as she walked to her one-room school house each day, watching buses full of white children kick up dust as they passed.

During high school, Mrs. King excelled academically and demonstrated a great talent for music. She attended Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where two years earlier her older sister, Edythe, had become the first black to enroll. At Antioch, she studied education and music.

In 1953, the young Coretta Scott was preparing for a career in music at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, when she met a young graduate student in philosophy. A year later she and Dr. King, then a young minister from a prominent Atlanta family, were married.

During Dr. King's career, Mrs. King mostly shied away from the prominent spotlight of her husband, balancing motherhood and movement work. She devoted most of her time to raising their four children: Yolanda Denise (born in 1955), Martin Luther, III (born in 1957), Dexter Scott (born in 1961), and Bernice Albertine (born in 1963). But she also gained recognition for the 'Freedom Concerts' she organized, where she lectured, read poetry and sang to raise awareness of and money for the burgeoning Civil Rights movement.

Upon the tragic assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968, Mrs. King bravely took up the mantle of the Civil Rights cause. Even before her husband was buried, she marched at the head of the garbage workers he had gone to Memphis to champion.

Over the next few decades, Coretta Scott King gained nationwide interest and admiration for her efforts to establish a national holiday in honor of her husband. By an Act of Congress, the first national observance of the holiday took place in 1986. Dr. King's birthday is now marked by annual celebrations in over 100 countries.

During the 1970s, Mrs. King continued to work on behalf of the cause of economic justice. In 1974 she formed the Full Employment Action Council, a broad coalition of over 100 religious, labor, business, civil and women's rights organizations dedicated to a national policy of full employment and equal economic opportunity.

She also helped to found the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Non-Violent Social Change in Atlanta, dedicated both to scholarship and to activism.

Over time, Mrs. King also developed her own causes and rhetoric, which were consistent with the vision of her husband. For example, when she stood in for her husband at the Poor People's Campaign at the Lincoln Memorial on June 19, 1968, she spoke not just of his vision for social justice, but also of gender and racial equality. She called upon

American women ‘to unite and form a solid block of women power to fight the three great evils of racism, poverty and war.’

Mrs. King also dedicated herself to the cause of peace, traveling throughout the world on goodwill missions to Africa, Latin America, Europe and Asia. In 1983, she marked the 20th Anniversary of the historic March on Washington, by leading a gathering of more than 800 human rights organizations, the Coalition of Conscience, in the largest demonstration the capital city had seen up to that time. And in 1993, Mrs. King was invited by President Clinton to witness the historic handshake between Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Chairman Yasser Arafat at the signing of the Middle East Peace Accords.

Mrs. King also envisioned plans for a memorial dedicated to her husband. Recently, I co-sponsored a bill that approved funding for such a memorial. This memorial will be the first on the National Mall in honor of a person of color. It is my hope that this memorial will continue to remind the nation, and the world, of the powerful words of hope Dr. King expressed here in Washington, DC, more than 40 years ago.

Throughout her life, Mrs. King was seen as an inspirational figure around the world, someone who truly personified the ideals to which she and Dr. King pledged their lives.

But although our country has come a long way since the days when our country first met the legendary Coretta Scott King and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., we still have much to accomplish. We must steadfastly protect the advances already made in the fight for social equality, and also further those advances in the years ahead.

We owe the legacy of Coretta Scott King, and that of her remarkable husband, the late Martin Luther King, Jr., no less.

Thank you.”

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