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General James Mattis

First Pentagon Address as Secretary of Defense

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Thanks very much.

And Mike [Rhodes], thank you. It's been a pleasure serving alongside you and watching your leadership and the way you can create harmony in some disharmonious places that you've been before. Good to see you back here at the Pentagon.

But deputy secretary, ladies and gentlemen of the Department [of Defense], good afternoon. And it's a[n] absolute delight to be here back among you again. And I would just tell you that it's appropriate that my first chance to speak to a group in the Pentagon is in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. It says something -- I just got lucky, I realize, with when the Vice President swore me in.

But I would also tell you that this recognizes someone who stood for something. And in our memories and our hearts and certainly by keeping his memory alive, he still stands for something that we're all very proud of.



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I'm equally proud of our Department, partly because, like Mike says, we are leaders when it comes to this sort of thing, civil rights. The year before it was a holiday -- we were already celebrating Martin Luther King Day here in the Department.

I've been part of the Department since I was 18 years old in 1969, which is in the last millennium, for you young people here.

But I -- I'm also proud of the Department for things that happened long before I ever joined it. Last Friday night, soon after taking the oath, I sent the message out to the Department, and I wrote that our nation needs to only look to you, the uniformed and civilian members of our Department and your families, to see the fundamental unity of our country.

And I think, ladies and gentlemen, anyone who's taken the oath has experienced that unity. We've experienced the coequal commitment -- didn't matter what rank you were; didn't matter if you're civilian or military -- a coequal commitment across this Department to the mission. And it's a mission that calls for all hands to strive together and to fight together and to look out for one another.



Today, we observe the legacy of a man up here on the board behind me -- a man who has called upon Americans many times to strive together and to fight together and to do their duty in the long struggle for equality and civil rights.



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In our nation's history, our military has often served as an example to the American people of unity and strength, of how a diverse group of people can be motivated even under austere or grim conditions of the battlefield, to come together as equals.



As far back as November 1805, in the first decades of our experiment in democracy on this continent, two young Army officers led a special unit, the Corps of Discovery, across the harsh landscape of North America to the Pacific Northwest. They arrived at the Pacific Ocean at the mouth of the Columbia River and faced months of cold and deprivation before the snows would melt, and they could return home to the East.

In this perilous situation, the unit was confronted with the choice of where to build their winter camp. And they had to look across the raging mouth of that river spilling into the ocean and they had to take a decision that could cost them their lives. Young Meriwether Lewis and William Clark put the matter of whether to cross the perilous mouth of the Columbia to all hands.

The unit included a slave named York and a Native American woman named Sacajawea. For the first time in the history of our Republic, among the members of this isolated patrol far from home, a black man, a Native American, white men, and a woman, all voted as equals. They voted to cross that terrible water, and the expedition survived the winter.

They returned East to report back to their Commander-in-Chief, President Thomas Jefferson. They accomplished their mission to find the best route to the Pacific, and it was an all-hands effort.



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Military service in America is a touchstone for American patriots of all races, genders, creeds. The men and women of the Department of Defense, military and civilian, reflect the diverse and selfless character of our national defense and have done so long before our nation had reached the level it has reached today in terms of civil rights.

Our Armed Forces are stronger today because of the perseverance of Dr. King and so many others in this country who have fought for civil rights and equality for all. And we can trace our Department's roots back to an Army patrol in 1805 when we listened to our better angels, and on this day of action, we are inspired to continue being a model for our nation.

So thank you all for being here. Thank you for continuing to defend this experiment in democracy. It's an absolute delight to be back among you. And I'm reminded of that especially on Martin Luther King Day.

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.

Mike, thank you.