

PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATION



DONALD JOHN TRUMP



On Jan. 21, 2019, President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence visit the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington. This year, Inauguration Day, in which Trump will be sworn in for a second term, and the King holiday fall on the same day. MANDEL NGAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES FILE

‘WE NEED TO HEAR WHAT HE SAYS’

Civil rights leaders urge Trump to honor King’s work

Deborah Barfield Berry USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — While Donald Trump is being sworn in as president for the second time on Monday, civil rights activists plan to take a different oath just a few blocks from the White House.

They will remember the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., whose federal holiday named in his honor also falls on that day, by pledging to challenge any efforts by the Trump administration to dismantle hard-fought gains in civil rights.

For these activists, Trump represents everything King worked against, and for them, it would dishonor King’s legacy to remain silent — on this of all days.

“Everything that Dr. King stood for, Donald Trump has stated clearly he wants to dislodge,” said the Rev. Al Sharpton, president of the National Action Network, which on Monday is leading a march to a historic Black church near the White House.

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On Monday, the Rev. Bernice King, daughter of the late civil rights leader, and others will participate in a program at the King Center in Atlanta. JASPER COLT/USA TODAY FILE

Follow the events

Find coverage of Monday’s inauguration and ceremonies at usatoday.com and in the Nation & World Extra section, a subscriber-only feature in your eNewspaper.

ANALYSIS

Trump poised to begin disruptive second term

Zac Anderson USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The message came at 4:28 p.m. on a Wednesday, seven days before Christmas and Hanukkah. Governing by social media was back, and so was Donald Trump.

Lawmakers had been eager to head home for the holidays after unveiling a stopgap funding bill to keep the U.S. government open that by all accounts looked to be cruising toward final passage. The president-elect had other plans, calling the bipartisan legislation pushed by GOP House leadership a “betrayal of our country” in a joint statement with Vice President-elect JD Vance posted on X.

Trump’s lightning bolt from Mar-a-Lago rocketed through the marbled-floored halls of the Capitol. It stunned lawmakers, who had to go back to the drawing board. Frustrated Democrats urged their GOP colleagues to stand firm. Republicans seemed baffled.

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Trump

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Sharpton and other civil rights leaders said the inauguration and King holiday falling on the same day offers a chance to remind the nation of work that still needs to be done. For them, that includes protecting voting rights, defending diversity initiatives, fighting for better wages and expanding access to quality and affordable health care.

It's also a chance, they said, to point out how King preached a message of love and unity to bring about change, while Trump's rhetoric often strikes them as hateful and divisive.

"We have an opportunity to focus even more heavily on my father because of the contrast of what he represented and, at least at this point, what President Trump has represented," Bernice King told USA TODAY. "The contrast, I think, is important because it's a reminder that the work that my father was doing must continue."

Take notes

On Monday, the Rev. Bernice King and civil rights and faith leaders will participate in a program at the King Center in Atlanta. She's encouraging people to watch before listening to Trump's speech.

"They're going to need to remember what I said," she said.

The Rev. William Barber, president of Repairers of the Breach and the center's keynote speaker, will urge faith leaders to take notes during Trump's speech and prepare a prophetic response, King said. Faith leaders plan to meet after the program to discuss plans going forward.

"Regardless of what people feel or think about President-elect Trump, at this point he's going to be the president of the United States," she said. "We need to hear what he says. It does not need to be ignored, because you cannot create an effective strategy making assumptions."

The date of the president's inauguration is set by the 20th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The only other president sworn in on the King holiday was Democrat Bill Clinton in 1997.

Trump's transition team did not respond to a request for comment other than to refer to the constitutional requirement that the inauguration be held



While Inauguration Day is always Jan. 20, it's the second time it's fallen on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, always the third Monday in January. FABRIZIO BENSCH/REUTERS

on Jan. 20. Martin Luther King Jr. Day is always celebrated on the third Monday in January, close to his Jan. 15 birthday.

'We're disciples of Dr. King'

Sharpton said the march won't interfere with the inauguration about 2 miles away. It will start at a park near the White House and end a few blocks away at Metropolitan AME Church. The church, which Sharpton called "sacred ground," has hosted many civil rights programs and the funeral service for abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

"We're not going up there," said Sharpton, referring to the U.S. Capitol. "We are not Jan. 6 insurrectionists. We're disciples of Dr. King."

Sharpton said while Trump takes the oath, activists gathered at the church will take an oath to keep King's dream alive.

Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League who will join Monday's march, said it's one way to show support for King's principles.

But Morial said the rally is not just about a single day.

Using attention as an opportunity

Adolphus Belk Jr., a professor of political science and African American studies at Winthrop University in South Carolina, said activists who care about King's work could use the attention to map out an agenda and strategy.

"Use this as an opportunity to take the initiative rather than responding to what the president may or may not do," Belk said. "Take the initiative to say, 'Here are our concerns as Americans, and these are the things we want to see addressed.'"

Civil rights activists said they are concerned about efforts to restrict voting rights and dismantle programs that support diversity initiatives.

Sharpton said his organization will put together a commission to look into which companies make money off Black communities, but plan to end diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. The results will be released April 4, the anniversary of King's assassination.

Sharpton noted that King fought for economic justice and helped lead successful economic boycotts.

Lowering bar on divisive rhetoric

At some points on the campaign trail, Trump has brought up King's name.

Last summer, Trump claimed the crowd size at a Jan. 6, 2021, rally near the White House was bigger than the crowd of approximately 250,000 at the 1963 March on Washington when King gave his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech.

Trump also called out King's name when he referred to then-North Carolina Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson as "Martin Luther King (Jr.) on steroids." Robinson, who was plagued by scandals, lost his bid to become the state's first Black gov-

ernor. The King family and others criticized the comparison.

Some civil rights leaders pointed to a stark contrast between the tactics of Trump and King, who preached nonviolence. Some activists also complained that Trump's divisive rhetoric is far from King's approach.

"It's not just President-elect Trump," Bernice King said. "It's just the tone and tenor of this season where people are hurling out very hateful statements."

She said her father didn't respond in kind to the hate spewed at him and other civil rights activists.

"Today, we've lowered the bar, so we think it's OK to go toe to toe with that same kind of attack and language," she said. "I just don't believe in calling names."

Celebrating King's legacy

Some Democrats, including several members of the Congressional Black Caucus, boycotted Trump's first inauguration in part because they said he had disrespected civil rights legend Georgia Rep. John Lewis, who died in 2020.

Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., the Mississippi Democrat who chaired the Jan. 6 commission and didn't attend Trump's first swearing-in, plans to participate in Martin Luther King Jr. Day events in his district, his office said.

Nicole Austin-Hillery, president of the nonpartisan Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, said caucus members are more concerned about addressing issues beyond Inauguration Day.

"They're focused on how do you do the work every day, 365 days a year, for the people in this country who need them, who depend on them and who want to see change," she said.

Morial and other civil rights activists said beyond Inauguration Day, they are open to talking to whoever is in office.

"I'll never close the door on opportunities to work on issues with any president," said Morial.

For her father, demonstrations were also part of a broader strategy, Bernice King said, that included meeting with White House officials and business owners in local communities.

"At the end of the day, when all is said and done in the next four years, what did we accomplish? What did we get done for our people?" she said. "That's what's going to be the most important thing."