MLK day: Remembering Dr. King once called for direct action against an unjust government

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As we take this past Monday to honor and reflect upon the life of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it becomes easy to frame the fight for civil rights as a thing of the past. Today, Alabama and Mississippi still honor slave owner and commander of the Confederate States Army, Robert E. Lee on the same day that MLK is revered. This seems to be a perfect representation of the deep-rooted and systematic racism in contemporary American Society.

Our current political climate has fostered the rise of white nationalism and white supremacy, and it is more important than ever to be reminded that there is much more work to do.

According to a report from the Anti-Defamation League, between Sept. 1, 2017, and May 31, 2018, there has been an almost 80 percent uptick in flyers appearing on college campuses. Almost 300 incidents across the country and around 450 over the past two years.

Just last year we saw white nationalist groups put flyers around the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Later in the year, we had two separate incidents where the N-word was written on school grounds. The best way for us to honor King’s legacy is to remember that direct action, resistance and civil disobedience is necessary and effective. There is no way to condense the life and legacy of Dr. King in this column.

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but the highlights of his career — and the U.S. — were direct results of resisting the Government.

Martin Luther King Jr. was born Jan. 15, 1929, in Atlanta. As the son of Martin Luther King Sr., a pastor, and Alberta Williams King, a former schoolteacher, King was an exceptional student. At the age of 15, he was admitted to Morehouse College, where he studied medicine and law. After graduating in 1948, he earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. He later earned a doctorate in systematic theology from Boston University in 1955. Dr. King's work as a preacher, his education and unique oratory skills made him easy to humanize, understand and connect with, allowing him to thrive as a civil rights leader.

On Dec. 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a secretary of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery bus and was arrested. Activists coordinated a bus boycott that continued for 381 days, and Dr. King became the protest's official leader and spokesman. It was only through placing a severe economic strain on the public transit system and downtown business owners that the boycotts succeed. The Supreme Court ruled segregated seating on public buses unconstitutional in November 1956.

During the Birmingham campaign of 1963, activists used boycotts, sit-ins and marches to protest segregation, unfair hiring practices and other injustices in one of America's most racially divided cities. Dr. King was arrested for his involvement April 12, resulting in him writing his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in which he defended his use of civil disobedience.

A passage reads: "I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is, in reality, expressing the highest respect for law.

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

The March on Washington for jobs and freedom came later that year, a peaceful political rally designed to shed light on the injustices African Americans continued to face across the country. Dr. King drew a crowd of nearly 200,000-300,000 people and gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

This moment cemented his legacy; he became the Time's first African American "Man of the Year" and the youngest person ever awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

In the spring of 1965, Dr. King's notoriety drew international attention to the violence that erupted between white segregationists and peaceful demonstrators in Selma, where the SCLC and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had organized a voter registration campaign.

The event was televised, sparking national outrage. Supporters from across the country gathered in Alabama to participate in the Selma to Montgomery march led by Dr. King and supported by President Lyndon B. Johnson, who sent in federal troops to keep the peace.

That August, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which guaranteed the right to vote — first awarded by the 15th Amendment — to all African Americans.

King's fight for civil rights came a dire cost: he was assassinated April 4, 1968. James Earl Ray confessed to his murder and received a sentence of 99 years in prison. King was no fool: he knew the risks. He understood the consequences of rebelling against an unjust system: and he did it anyway.

You can honor MLK every single day if you remember his famous words: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."