

## President Obama Stands on the Shoulders of 50 Years of History

Written by Marc Morial

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*"You can kill a man, but you can't kill an idea."*

### **- Slain Civil Rights leader, Medgar Evers**

When President Obama took the oath of office on Monday, he was surrounded by an extraordinary legacy of 50-year civil rights milestones that helped make possible his first and second inauguration. It was fitting that the inaugural invocation was delivered on the steps of the U.S. Capitol by Myrlie Evers-Williams, the widow of civil rights hero, Medgar Evers.

After years of risking his life to end discrimination against Black Mississippians, Evers was felled by an assassin's bullet in the driveway of his home 50 years ago on June 12, 1963.

Whether serving his country as a soldier in World War II, or leading the fight to desegregate the University of Mississippi, or working to end Jim Crow as the state's first NAACP field director, Medgar Evers was a fearless, peaceful warrior who paved the way for President Obama and countless others who have been inspired by his example. An assassin cut short his life in 1963, but Myrlie Evers-Williams went on to devote her life, as an NAACP leader and civil rights activist, to the ideas he fought and died for. Medgar Evers, ironically was killed on June 12, just hours after President John F. Kennedy delivered a nationally televised speech in support of civil rights. President Kennedy, himself, was assassinated only five months later, 50 years ago, on November 22, 1963.

President Obama took the oath of office holding a Bible belonging to another champion of civil

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rights and American democracy – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Fifty years ago, on August 28, 1963, Dr. King inspired America and the entire world with his “I Have a Dream Speech” delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in front of more than 250,000 people during the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

The March was organized by Dr. King with help from the National Urban League’s Whitney M. Young, along with A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality, John Lewis of the Southern Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP.

The March on Washington was instrumental in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Finally, President Obama will be sworn-in 50 years after one of the most horrific events of the civil rights era, the 1963 bombing of Birmingham, Alabama’s 16th Street Baptist Church, which resulted in the deaths of four little Black girls – Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley, all 14 years old, and 11-year-old Denise McNair. The Birmingham church bombing galvanized the conscience of the nation and led many Whites to denounce racism and its brutal consequences. Those four young Black girls did not die in vain. As Dr. King said in his eulogy, their deaths, “...say to each of us, Black and White alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream.”

Fifty years later, America’s first Black president has completed his second inauguration.

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