



April 15, 2020

## Is Our Government For Us or Against Us?

In April 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. told a group of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee: “We’ve got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end. Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point in Memphis. We’ve got to see it through.” King believed that the struggle in Memphis exposed the need for economic equality and social justice that he hoped his Poor People’s Campaign would highlight nationally. Today, we have to reignite the Poor People’s Campaign and come together to defeat attacks on the heart and soul of America’s families.

President John F. Kennedy famously stated in his 1961 inaugural address: “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.” We must remember that this was said during the Cold War, when President Kennedy was trying to motivate those able to serve to fight and defeat Communism. But, it seems almost like a luxury to be able to respond to such a call. What if you actually needed the help of your government and your country? I think that government is either for you or against you. And we don’t have to search hard for some examples.

The state of Illinois has a fundamental goal to provide the educational development of all persons to the limits of their capacities. The state shall provide for an efficient system of high quality public educational institutions and services. Education in public schools through the secondary level shall be free. But, if you are a family living on the West or South Sides of Chicago, the question must be asked: is the government for you or against you? With addiction to heroin, daily violence, and our communities flooded with guns, and a lack of behavioral/mental health supports on the West and South Sides of Chicago, we are forced to ask the question: is the government for us or against us? If you are more likely to be caught up in the criminal justice system because of the color of your skin, the question must be asked: is the government for us or against us? If you are a citizen that has run afoul of the law and have paid the debt for your crime, but you have no path back as a returned citizen with the possibilities of life, liberty and the pursuit to happiness, you have to ask yourself: is the government for you or against you?

If you are Black and the police can shoot you even when it is not justified, you have to ask: is the government for you or against you? if you are a women and you're paid less than a man, you have to ask: is the government for you or against you? If your student loan debt interest rate is too high and you can’t negotiate a better rate, you have to ask: is the government for you or against you? If you can't afford to go to college, you have to ask: is the government for you or against you? If you are Black or Brown and you do the same job as a white but are paid less, you have to ask: is the government for you or against you? If you’re a Black contractor and you can’t get a government contract, you have to ask: is the government for you or against you? If you are born in poverty in America, and you are more likely to live and die in poverty, you have to ask: is the government for you or against you? If public policy is a barrier to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, you have to ask: is the government for you or against you? The challenge raised by President Kennedy just doesn’t fit everyone. Even today, we still can’t ask the question of everyone: “what can you do for our country?” We still need our country to recognize what it must do for people who have been left behind.

The life and death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has given America a conscience and a guide to live up to America's 227-year-old Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1791 and guaranteeing such rights as our freedoms of speech, assembly, and worship. Dr. King lived and died fighting for peace, fairness, and justice for all - and because he lived, America is better.

The ongoing struggle in America to fight an unfair criminal justice system, widening income inequality, unjust tax systems, deadly police brutality, separate and unequal school systems, and racist policies which really impact the freedom of all Americans. Let's continue our fight for justice and let's fight together to undo bad public policies, as we are inspired by Dr. King. As Dr. Fauci says, "When all this is over and, as we said, it will end, we will get over coronavirus, but there will still be disparities which we really do need to address in the African American community."

Let's all be safe at this time, and let's fight to put an end to ALL disparities that affect Blacks.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LSK', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford  
State Representative-Eighth District