It is an honor to speak to you on this day commemorating the birth and contributions of Martin Luther King Jr. What Dr. King did greatly impacted the nation. He certainly impacted my life, and I believe that we cannot honor him enough.

I have had a long association with Lincoln Laboratory. I first heard of Lincoln Labs from one of my mentors, William Root. Bill wrote one of the definitive texts on communication theory when he worked at Lincoln Laboratory in the 1950s. I have since visited here many times. I even visited your missile test range at Kwajalein Island many years ago when I was with the U.S. Army. So, I thank you for inviting me here today.

We are here to honor Dr. Martin Luther King and to try to understand the meaning of what he did for the country.

The Civil Rights Movement unfolded in the 1950s and the 1960s before many of you were born. For most of you, what you know of the Civil Rights Movement, you learned from history books or television documentaries, and after the fact. While history can provide the facts, it is sometimes hard to appreciate the real impact on people’s lives.

In 2001, Vernon Jordan, one of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, wrote a memoir of his life. When asked why he did so, one of the reasons he gave was that he wanted his children to know what the civil rights struggle was about.

His children and others of their generation did not understand why sitting at a lunch counter was so important. They did not understand that the lunch counter was but a symbol of the deep suppression that African Americans experienced in the South and sometimes in the North. They did not understand how the lives they led were so different from the lives of their parents. They did not fully understand the impact that Martin Luther King had on their lives.

Martin Luther King recognized a fundamental dilemma that has haunted our nation from its beginning. In his “I Have a Dream” speech, he said, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”

That creed comes from the Declaration of Independence, written in 1776 by Thomas Jefferson, 238 years ago. That was a time when the American colonists were professing their love of freedom to the British Crown in order to justify the resort to revolution.
However, by the time the colonists wrote the Constitution in 1789, that creed was already compromised by the sanctioning of slavery and denying voting rights to many men and women.

The Civil War, which freed the slaves, and the subsequent Reconstruction Amendments to the Constitution, brought us closer to the creed of equality as a matter of law.

However, many states in the South decided to ignore these constitutional rights and denied African Americans many of those rights, including the right to vote. Thus, although the Constitution with these amendments came closer to the creed of the Declaration of Independence, in practice not much changed.

In 1896, the Supreme Court issued a ruling in the case of Plessy v. Ferguson that appeared to strengthen equality. It put forth the idea of “separate but equal.” It promised equality even in a segregated society. In practice, it did not make things equal because this provision was never enforced. In fact, in the South and in some areas of the North, things were more unequal.

Thus, even as our Constitution was coming closer to the creed of all men created equal, these laws were simply ignored by many states.

This was the background of the 1950s in New Orleans where I grew up. The law still did not encode the creed of equality in the Declaration of Independence, and even worse, states were allowed to ignore the laws that did exist.

I would like to share with you some of my own experiences growing up in a “separate but unequal” South. This was not just about lunch counters. We grew up in a truly oppressive society.

Resources for education in New Orleans were distinctly unequal. African American students simply did not have the same opportunities as white students. In spite of that, many African Americans excelled. However, many more did not have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

The grade school I attended was a parochial school that was underfunded as were public schools for African Americans. For example, our school had no library, only an encyclopedia. I spent much of my spare time reading that encyclopedia.

When I was in the eighth grade, there was a bookmobile that came to my school to lend books. I read my first book that year on the life of Roald Amundsen, the first man to lead a successful expedition to the South Pole.

When it came time for me to attend high school, my choices were limited. I was extremely fortunate to go to a very good African American Catholic High School, St. Augustine High School. However, my educational resources were still limited.

The public libraries in the city were segregated and unequal. African Americans could not go to the main library where all the “good stuff” was. Instead, there was one library in the city for African Americans. That library did not have the books and periodicals that my English teacher wanted us to read. Fortunately, my teacher made an arrangement with the chief librarian at the
main library to let me and some of my fellow students in the back door. By sitting in certain areas and being discreet, we were able to access the materials we needed.

Opportunities for employment were also limited. Young African Americans could aspire to be doctors, lawyers, teachers, and preachers, and hope to work in the South. African Americans in these professions could function in a segregated society by serving their own people.

Engineering was not like that then and still is not like that. Generally, engineers work for companies, and companies in the South, and many in the North, did not let African American engineers work as equals with white engineers. When I decided to study engineering, I knew that I would have to go out of state to study, and that I would never get a job in the South as an engineer.

The state of Louisiana was happy for me to go out of state. In fact, they paid half my costs to go to the University of Notre Dame rather than have me apply to Louisiana State University (LSU). I thought that was a good deal.

The fact that many African Americans excelled is testament to their efforts and not the product of the equality promised in the Declaration of independence.

Another aspect of life in the South was fear—even in the 1950s. In 1955, a 14-year-old boy from Chicago named Emmett Till was tortured and murdered while visiting relatives in Mississippi. The men accused of the crime were acquitted by an all-white jury. They later confessed that they had done it.

The target of the lynching was not only Emmett Till but all African American men who would dare offend a white person. The lesson of Emmitt Till was that “we can kill you and no one will do anything about it.”

I experienced that fear a few years later when a friend and I were driving from New Orleans to South Bend, Indiana, to return to college in early January. Our route took us through Mississippi, not far from where Emmitt Till was killed. We planned to get through Mississippi as quickly as possible and make few stops. Unfortunately, the car broke down late at night on a two-lane highway between two towns. It was pitch black. We knew we were in trouble. If something happened to us, we knew that no one would come to our aid, and no one would be convicted for what they might have done to us.

My friend decided to walk into the next town. He later came back with the town sheriff, who offered to tow our car into town and park it at a service station where we could get it fixed in the morning. After arriving in town, we thanked him and went to sleep in the car.

About 2:00 a.m., we heard a knock on the window. It was the sheriff. He asked us if we would like to sleep in the jail since it was so cold outside. We both shouted, “No, we’re warm,” as we continued to freeze. We did not want to take a chance of disappearing in the jail. I felt the fear.

I tell you this story to give you a sense of how oppressive life was in the South.

Thus, we had a situation in which the laws were not adequate to enforce equality, and even the laws we had were not enforced. The NAACP was organized in 1909, in part, to try to get the
laws enforced. Plessy v. Ferguson legalized “separate but equal.” The NAACP attempted to show that things were indeed not equal and make “separate but equal” a reality.

The NAACP made some progress under this strategy, but it was very slow. Finally, the NAACP decided to attack Plessy v. Ferguson itself in the case Brown v. Board of Education. The NAACP argued that separate education is inherently unequal. In the spring of 1954, the Supreme Court agreed.

I remember walking down the street in New Orleans in the spring of 1954 and seeing the headline in the afternoon paper, which proclaimed that segregation in schools had been outlawed by the Supreme Court and that Plessy v. Ferguson was overturned.

I remember thinking that next year I might want to go to a white high school. I might want to go to a white restaurant. I might want to sit in the front of the bus. I could walk in the front door of the main library. Maybe I would not have to go out of state for an engineering job. I was wrong.

Nothing changed. The court said that change should come “with all deliberate speed,” but nothing happened immediately. For example, it took more than ten years for the New Orleans schools to integrate.

Given this slow pace of change, a new strategy was needed. Martin Luther King brought that new strategy. His strategy of nonviolent resistance was what was needed to bring real change.

It started with his leadership of the Montgomery bus boycott from 1955 to 1956, which led to the outlawing of segregation on the Montgomery buses. He was successful in integrating the buses in Montgomery, while others who had tried before were not successful. A big part of his success was television. He was able to show the nation the oppressive injustice of segregation. Thus, he brought not only a new strategy, but he also developed tactics to make that strategy work.

Dr. King provided the personal and intellectual leadership to help bring the law in line with the creed “all men are created equal.” By showing the nation the injustice of segregation, he built a movement that engaged the nation, especially young people, to fight segregation.

In 1957, under the leadership of Lyndon Johnson, who was then the leader of the U.S. Senate, the first civil rights bill since the days of Reconstruction was passed. This bill set up a Civil Rights Commission to study various issues of civil rights, including voting rights. John Hannah, the former president of Michigan State University, was chosen as chairman of that commission.

It was in 1963 that Martin Luther King led the now-famous march on Washington, where he gave his “I Have a Dream” speech. A year later, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

It was not just African Americans who benefited from the civil rights movement. The 1964 act outlawed discrimination on the basis race, sex, national origin, or religion. Later, laws outlawed discrimination on the basis of age or disability. This was a sea change in our laws that we continue to benefit from today.
While Martin Luther King was the catalyst for change, I believe that Lyndon Johnson did more for civil rights than any president since Abraham Lincoln.

Martin Luther King continued his work to eliminate discrimination, both legal and nonlegal. In 1968, he was assassinated, while supporting the strike by garbage workers in Memphis.

The dream that Martin Luther King worked for has still not been fully realized. There are still challenges. I think we are closer to that dream, but we are not there. To fully realize that dream, we need more than laws. We need people to share that dream and work to make it happen.

One area where you can have an impact is getting minorities and women into Lincoln Laboratory and helping them succeed. This is not a problem that the management at Lincoln Laboratory can solve by itself. The Laboratory is a place where technical hiring decisions are greatly influenced by you, the technical staff. Without your support, nothing will happen.

I urge you to ask what you can do. Can you help hire and mentor interns who are underrepresented minorities or women? Can you mentor or team with minority or women staff members to help them succeed at Lincoln Laboratory?

Martin Luther King appealed to the nation to do the right thing. The response was profound. It changed America and brought us closer to the dream of living the creed, “All men are created equal.” Let us continue to do our part.