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Remarks of Senator Edmund S. Muskie on the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Ebenezer Baptist Church Service

Edmund S. Muskie

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REMARKS OF SEN. EDMUND S. MUSKIE (D-ME)

EBENEZER BAPTIST CHURCH SERVICE

ATLANTA, GA.

DECEMBER 12, 1971

Friends, I think it's more appropriate for me to speak from this podium than that altar. I don't quite aspire to that high office.

First of all may I say, on behalf of Mrs. Muskie and myself, how glad we are to be here and join your Sunday worship. I last stood in this church a little more than three and a half years ago, and that is a day which will always live in my memory. The tens of thousands of black and white who joined together on that day were a tribute to a man. A man whose life was testimony to his belief that with persistence and determination and compassion and understanding, they and millions more across this land could be joined together in brotherhood.

Throughout my lifetime I've come to know that we learn from each other in many ways. Too often we learn of each other's weaknesses and shortcomings and the consequences for others. Occasionally we learn a great truth in an illuminating way, from someone who makes us see it in a way that gives us light. Martin Luther King was such a teacher and his truth lives with us still. But his dream remains unfulfilled.

This is a religious service and I'm sensitive to that fact. Notwithstanding Rev. King's references to my intentions for next year, it is not a political service. But nevertheless, I want to say something to you with political overtones.

I've had an unusual opportunity in the last year, especially, to meet Americans of all descriptions--black and white, rich and poor, young and old--in all regions of this country. I tried to learn as much as I could from each of them, about each of them, to test myself for what may lie ahead. I happen to believe that next year will be an important political year. Not so much for those who may seek high office, but for the people of this country who look to leadership, who look to government, who look to the structure of our society to meet the day-to-day problems of their lives. And I think our country needs leadership in whom our people, whoever they are, may have confidence. So I've been trying to test myself through the eyes and the hearts

and the minds of others, including yourselves, to know whether or not I can measure up to what you need.

I understand in a way I could not have understood otherwise that our country is divided--in its view of itself, in its suspicions, in its doubts, in its hatreds, in its points of view. And I happen to believe, and believe deeply, that our country can truly serve its people, whoever they are, only to the extent that they can find it possible to reach out to each other.

How, then, do we reach out? We're not always sure in what ways we are discriminating against each other. We are not always sure in what ways we are hurting each other. We are not always sure how we can touch the real lives, the real urgings, the real aspirations of others. We know some of the consequences. We know that there is discrimination when there should be none. We know that there is injustice which should be eradicated. We know that there is hunger when there is no need for it. We know that there is frustration and hopelessness where there should be life and hope.

I come from a different background than anyone in this room. But the place where I am and what my life has become has been made possible because someone before me had hope. Someone before me had hope which was justified by what he saw in this country and its true purposes.

I come here today, not so much to advance any political purpose I have, but to submit myself to your test. A test which, I hope, may begin today and end at some point down the line to your satisfaction. I come here to make a commitment: If I should seek the highest office in this land, I want to make it clear that I would do so with a commitment to eradicate, to the extent that it is within my power, injustice, discrimination, prejudice, hunger, deprivation, in whatever form. I would like to be identified with the promise that can be our country.

Martin Luther King set a terribly high standard for us. He was able to find courage, and the will, and the vision to commit himself to what he believed to be right. The rest of us often fall short of that commitment. And we fall terribly short of that commitment. And the real test of our lives is the extent to which we find it possible out of our hearts, out of our spiritual resources, out of our minds, out of the confidence we're able to generate in others, to meet that commitment fully.

I make this promise: That to the extent it is given to me to advance this country toward the road to justice, I commit myself to try. And if I fall short, I hope you will judge me, and judge me harshly. I see no other basis,

no other justification for traveling this road. So I hope we get to know each other, to know each other well, to know what is inside as well as outside.

I remember so well the story of the little black girl who asked a Congressional committee, "Why am I black? Why don't people like me because I'm black?" And I remember Martin Luther King's reply, "God made you black because He loves you." And it's that message of love that is Martin Luther King, Jr's., monument. That monument exists in the hearts of, not only blacks, but whites as well. And I'd like to do something to even approach his commitment to that ideal.

And so thank you for Mrs. Muskie and myself for letting us join you.
It makes this another memorable day in our lives.
