

A Holy day for Martin Luther King

(Remarks of the President at the signing ceremony for Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday legislation.)

When I was thinking of the contributions to our country, the man that we're honoring today, a passage attributed to the American poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, comes to mind. "Each crisis brings

its word and deed." In America, in the fifties and sixties, one of the most important crises we faced was racial discrimination. The man whose words and deeds in that crisis stirred our nation to the very depths of its soul was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King was born in 1929, in an America where, because

of the color of their skin, nearly one in ten lived lives that were separate and unequal. Most Black Americans were taught in segregated schools. Across the country, too many could find only poor jobs, toiling for low wages. They were refused entry into hotels and restaurants, and made to use separate facilities.

In a nation that proclaimed liberty and justice for all, too many Black Americans were living with neither. In one city, a rule required all Blacks to sit in the rear of public buses. But in 1955, when a brave woman named Rosa Parks was told to move to the back of the bus, she said, "No." A young minister in a local Baptist church, Martin Luther King, then organized a boycott of the bus company—a boycott that stunned the country.

Within six months the courts had ruled the segregation of public transportation unconstitutional. Dr. King had awakened something strong and true, a sense that true justice must be color-blind, and that among white and Black Americans, as he put it, "Their destiny is tied up with our destiny, and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom; we cannot walk alone."

In the years after the bus boycott, Dr. King made equality of rights his life's work. Across the country, he organized boycotts, rallies and marches. Often, he was beaten, imprisoned, but he never stopped teaching non-violence. "Work with the faith," he told his followers, that honor and suffering is redemptive. In 1964, Dr. King became the youngest man in history to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Dr. King's work brought him to this city often. And in one sweltering August day in 1963, he addressed a quarter of a million people at the Lincoln Memorial. If American history grows from two centuries to twenty, his words that day will never be forgotten. "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

In 1968, Martin Luther King was



President Reagan signs HR 3706, which establishes the third Monday in January, beginning in 1986, as a legal holiday for the observance of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Left to right: Coretta King; Gloria Toot, Vice Chairman for

President's Advisory Council for Private Sector Initiatives; Samuel R. Pierce, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development; J. Steven Rhodes, Assistant to the Vice President for Domestic Policy; and Senator Howard Baker.

After fifteen years . . .

On October 19, 1983, the United States Senate joined the House of Representatives in overwhelmingly passing the King Holiday Bill, setting a national holiday to honor the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Fifteen years after his assassination the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Baptist minister and founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference became the second American whose birthday is observed by a national holiday; the other is George Washington.

The King Holiday Bill was first introduced by Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich) a few weeks after Dr. King was assassinated—April 4, 1968. Various versions of the bill were introduced 78 times since then and each time were voted down or did not reach the floor for debate.

"We're sorry it has taken fifteen years for this historic occasion," Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass) told Coretta Scott King. Kennedy co-sponsored the bill in the Senate because King "is a second father of our country." Because of King's work, he said, "we are bound together, we were woven together, in a single garment of destiny. So, how right it is that Americans, Black and white together, all of us, shall celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday as as singular holiday of freedom."

After the final vote the bill's principal Senate sponsor, Senator Charles Matthias (R-Md), said, "If Martin Luther King were here with us today and we could sing again that old song, we could sing, 'We Have Overcome Today.'"

Mrs. King thanked President Reagan for finally supporting the bill and reminded him of his commitment to sign it into law. Reagan told a news conference that he would sign the bill because of its symbolic importance but said he did not fault the "sincerity" of those who fought the bill's passage by attempting to release FBI surveillance files, saying, "We'll know in about 35 years, won't we...?"

The legislation becomes effective in January of 1986, setting aside the third Monday in January.

Dr. Joseph Lowery, president of SCLC, urged all Americans to begin in 1984 to observe a "HOLY-day" rather than the traditional holiday.

The unique significance of this holy-day, he said, must not only rest on the fact that it is the first time such an honor has been bestowed on a Black American, but "it must be observed as a day of worship and prayer for peace and justice; study of non-violence and recommitment." It is the people's day—a HOLY day.

gunned down by a brutal assassin, his life cut short at the age of 39. But those 39 short years had changed America forever. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had guaranteed all Americans equal use of public accommodations, equal access to programs financed by federal funds, and the right to compete for employment on the sole basis of individual merit.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 had made certain that from then on, Black Americans would get to vote. But most important, it was not just a change of law. It was a change of heart; the conscience of America had been touched. Across the land, people had begun to treat each other, not as Blacks and whites, but as fellow Americans, and since Dr. King's death, his father, the Rever-

end Martin Luther King, Sr., and his wife, Coretta King, have eloquently and forcefully carried on his work. Also his family have joined in that cause.

Now our nation has decided to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., by setting aside a day each year to remember him and the just cause he stood for. We've made historic strides since Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus. As a democratic people, we can take pride in the knowledge that we Americans recognized a grave injustice and took action to correct it and we should remember that in far too many countries, people like Dr. King never had the opportunity to speak out, at all.

But traces of bigotry still mar America. So each year on Martin

Luther King Day, let us not only recall Dr. King, but rededicate ourselves to the commandments he believed in and sought to live every day. "thou shalt love thy God with all they heart and thou shalt love thy neighbor as theyself." And I just have to believe that all of us, if all of us, young and old, Republicans and Democrats, do all we can to live up to those commandments, then we will see the day when Dr. King's dream comes true, and in his words, "All of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

Thank you, God Bless you, and I will sign it.

—November 2, 1983

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