

The Meaning of Memory: Establishing the Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday

Mira Cohen

How our nation chooses its holidays is a complicated, interesting, and not necessarily uniform process. While the basic procedures for establishing a national holiday are clear, the behind-the-scenes processes often require years of lobbying. There is no systematic rule for determining why some days of importance become national holidays, such as Labor Day, and why some, such as September 11, become a National Day of Service and Remembrance.

National holidays are established by Congress and signed into law by the president. Even after national holidays are established, details relating to observance of the holiday are rarely prescribed and often vary from region to region or even between institutions. Inauguration Day, which occurs once every four years, serves as an exception to the norm as it is accompanied by a rigorous set of prescribed rituals in which only a few select citizens directly participate.

Additionally, because of our system of federalism, the law only requires that federal employees be given the day off. This allows states and private businesses to make their own decisions regarding their employees. Moreover, many question the meaning of a federal holiday as a day off of work if there is no specific ritual attached to the holiday. Oftentimes, the meaning of a holiday is lost or altered over time. For instance, Memorial Day was originally established to honor those who died in the Civil War, but today it is observed in memory of all fallen United States soldiers.

Signed into law by President Ronald Reagan, Martin Luther King, Jr., Day is the newest of all federal holidays. It is legally observed as a day off work for federal workers. Shortly after the assassination of Dr. King, in April 1968,

Congressman John Conyers (D-Mich.) introduced the first bill seeking to make King's birthday a national holiday. As the process for creating the legislation had begun so soon after King's death, 17 states had already established the holiday for state workers by the time the day became a legal holiday for federal employees. In fact, King's widow, Coretta Scott King, in conjunction with supporters, launched a massive, nationwide campaign to create a national holiday. In 1982, Mrs. King and Stevie Wonder presented petitions with more than six million signatures in support of the holiday to Thomas (Tip) O'Neill, speaker of the House of Representatives. In 1983, H.R. 3706, the legislation creating a public holiday to commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr., was signed into law.

H.R. 3706

The bill that originated in the House of Representatives (H.R. 3706) and was jointly sponsored by Reps. Katie Hall (D-Ind.) and Jack Kemp (R-N.Y.), passed the House by a vote of 338-90. The Senate holiday bill was sponsored by Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) and passed by a vote of 78-22. These votes created a veto-proof majority on both sides of the Congress.

Both majority and minority opinions reflected a sense of honor for the character and work of Dr. King. The minority opinion, which President Reagan initially supported, expressed respect for King's accomplishments but suggested, instead, that the third Sunday in January be declared a day of remembrance instead of a national holiday due to fiscal concerns about a national holiday with a paid day off for federal employees. William Dannemeyer, writing for the minority stated, "With respect to H.R. 33445 (an earlier version of the bill), the main question before us is not whether we should honor Dr. King, but how we should honor the man and his vision."

In an earlier congressional document, the purpose of the holiday was described as follows:

Martin Luther King, Jr., gave to this great country a new understanding of equality and justice for all. He taught us that our democratic principles could be seriously impaired if they were not applied equally, and that tailoring these principles through nonviolence would have a lasting effect. This legislation will act as a national commitment to Dr. King's vision of an ideal America, which he spoke of the day before his death, where equality will always prevail....

The committee's action with respect to this bill is based solely on its examination of Dr. King's monumental contribution to the Nation.



President Reagan signs the law declaring Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday a federal holiday as Coretta Scott King (second from the left) looks on.

(Courtesy of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library)

In his “Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a National Holiday” on November 2, 1983, President Reagan stated, “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.”

Yet, as with all federal holidays, the question of consistency of observance persists. What do you do on a day of remembrance?

The King Center website (www.thekingcenter.org) contains an essay by Coretta Scott King titled, “The Meaning of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday.” In this essay, she states

Every King Holiday has been a national ‘teach-in’ on the values of non-violence, including unconditional love, tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation, which are so desperately needed to unify

America. It is a day of intensive education and training in Martin’s philosophy and methods of nonviolent social change and conflict-reconciliation. The Holiday provides a unique opportunity to teach young people to fight evil, not people, to get in the habit of asking themselves, “what is the most loving way I can resolve this conflict?”

How do you and your community observe Martin Luther King, Jr., Day? What do you think is the best way to honor Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Document List:

- Memorandum for the President on H.R. 3706, from the Office of Management and Budget, October 25, 1983
- H.R. 3706 – An Act to Amend title 5, United States Code, to make the

birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a legal public holiday.

- Letter from Richard G. Darman to President Ronald Reagan with instructions for signature of H.R. 3706, November 2, 1983
- Signing Ceremony for Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday, November 2, 1983

Discussion Questions:

1. *What is the difference between a bill and an act?*

A bill is a legislative suggestion. It needs to be approved by the Congress and, in most cases, the president to become a law. An act is a law.

Document: Read H.R. 3706 and answer the following questions.

continued on page 338

FOR SIGNING CEREMONY

The President has seen

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

November 2, 1983

MR. PRESIDENT:

Attached for your signature is
Enrolled Bill H.R. 3706 - Martin
Luther King, Jr. Birthday.

This Bill is recommended for
approval by OMB, the Office of
Personnel Management, Ken Duberstein,
Dave Gergen, and the Offices of
Cabinet Affairs, Policy Development
and Public Liaison. Fred Fielding
has no legal objection.

LAST DAY FOR ACTION: TODAY



Richard G. Darman

Please Note: This is scheduled
to be signed in ceremony today.

*Ceremony & Remarks
Rose Garden, 11:06 AM*

The President has seen _____

APPROVED
NOV - 2 1983

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20503

Received SS
1983 OCT 25 PM 5:22

OCT 25 1983

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Subject: Enrolled Bill H.R. 3706 - Martin Luther King, Jr.
Birthday
Sponsor - Rep. Hall (D) Indiana and 108 others

Last Day for Action

November 2, 1983 - Wednesday

Purpose

Establishes the third Monday in January as a legal public holiday for the observance of the birthday of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., beginning with January 1986.

Agency Recommendations

Office of Management and Budget Approval

Office of Personnel Management Approval

Discussion

H.R. 3706 would add the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., as the tenth paid holiday for the Federal Government, to be observed on the third Monday of January each year, beginning January 20, 1986. Currently, about 20 States and other jurisdictions observe a day in honor of Dr. King.

The Administration favored national recognition of Dr. King's birthday to honor his memory, but preferred that the commemoration not involve an additional paid holiday for Federal employees. Efforts in the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee and on the Senate floor to substitute a day of commemoration without a paid holiday were unsuccessful.

The normal, daily payroll cost for a workday in the Federal Government, excluding the Postal Service, is about \$210 million for salary and benefits. The added cost for extra premium pay to employees who are required to work on a holiday is estimated to be about \$25 million in 1986, when the holiday takes effect. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that this cost would be partially offset by about \$7 million in savings in utility costs from closing down Government offices on a Friday or a Monday during the winter, so that the net added cost of the new holiday to the Government would be \$18 million.

second page of document

2

H.R. 3706 was passed by the House by a vote of 338-90 under suspension of the rules, and was passed by the Senate by a vote of 78-22.

David A. Stockman
David A. Stockman
Director

Enclosures

Ninety-eighth Congress of the United States of America

AT THE FIRST SESSION

*Begun and held at the City of Washington on Monday, the third day of January,
one thousand nine hundred and eighty-three*



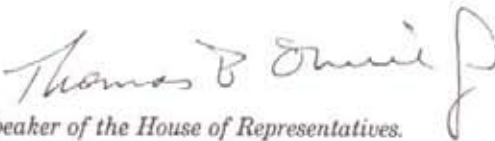
An Act


To amend title 5, United States Code, to make the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a legal public holiday.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That section 6103(a) of title 5, United States Code, is amended by inserting immediately below the item relating to New Year's Day the following:

"Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., the third Monday in January."

SEC. 2. The amendment made by the first section of this Act shall take effect on the first January 1 that occurs after the two-year period following the date of the enactment of this Act.


Thomas B. Downey
Speaker of the House of Representatives.


George Bush
Vice President of the United States and
President of the Senate.

APPROVED

NOV - 2 1983


Ronald Reagan

Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a National Holiday (November 2, 1983)

Mrs. King, members of the King family, distinguished Members of the Congress, ladies and gentlemen, honored guests, I'm very pleased to welcome you to the White House, the home that belongs to all of us, the American people.

When I was thinking of the contributions to our country of 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 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 1 in 10 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, 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 colorblind, 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 nonviolence. "Work with the faith," he told his followers, "that unearned 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 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, there was not just a change of law; there 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 Reverend 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 have 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 shall love thy God with all thy heart, and thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself. 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.

MEANING OF MEMORY *from page 333*

1. *Did this act originate in the House of Representatives or the Senate? How do you know?*

The act originated in the House of Representatives. This is clear because it is titled, “H.R. 3706” meaning it was the 3706th bill introduced into the 98th Congress of the United States.

2. *List three adjectives to describe the act’s appearance.*

Student answers will vary (short, official, lots of signatures, fancy, etc.). Anything accurate is fine. The goal is to have students examine the nature of the text.

3. *List the names of two people who signed the act.*

Thomas O’Neill, speaker of the House and George H.W. Bush, vice president

and president of the senate, signed the bill for Congress. President Reagan, as chief executive, signed the bill into law.

4. *When was Martin Luther King, Jr., Day first observed?*

Martin Luther King, Jr., Day was first observed on January 20, 1986; as Section 2 states, “The amendment made by the first section of this Act shall take effect on the first January 1 that occurs after the two-year period following the date of the enactment of this Act.”

Document: Memorandum for the President on H.R. 3706, from the Office of Management and Budget, October 25, 1983

1. *How many member of Congress voted in favor of the act? How many voted against?*

House 388-90; Senate 78-22

2. *What was the major reason given for voting against the act?*

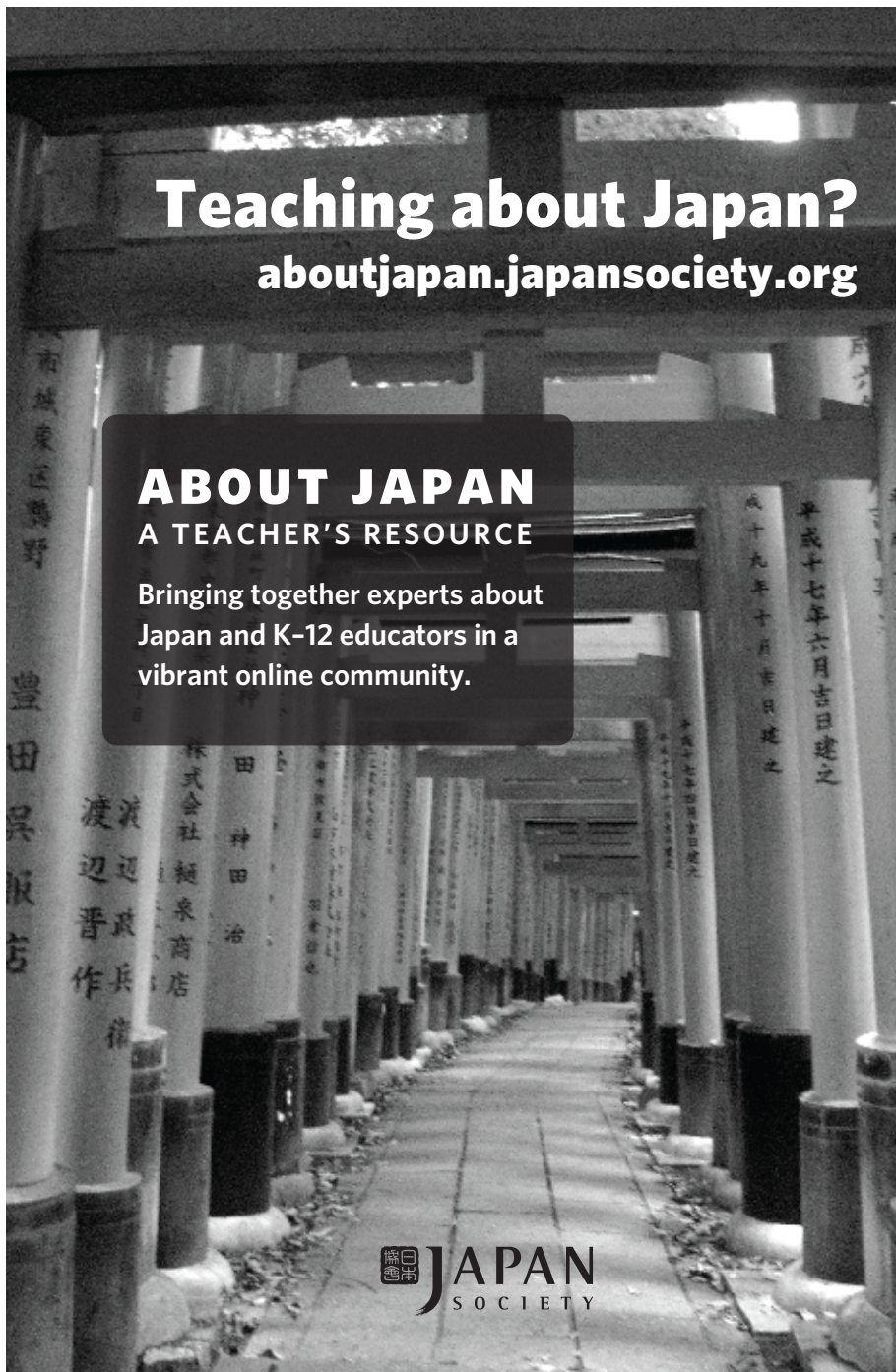
The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office estimated a cost of \$18 million a year based mostly on the cost of a paid holiday for federal workers:

“A paid holiday for Federal workers is the wrong statement at the wrong time and contrary to legislative policy. It is also costly.”

Thinking Questions:

1. *What do you do to observe Martin Luther King, Jr., Day?*
2. *Do you have any other ideas of activities you could create or do to observe Martin Luther King, Jr., Day?*

MIRA COHEN is the director of education at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. She served as the creator and project director of the Thea award winning *Air Force One Discovery Center*. Ms. Cohen has developed curriculum and programming for the PBS television series, *The American President*; the *Zimmer Children’s Museum*; and *UCLA educator institutes*.

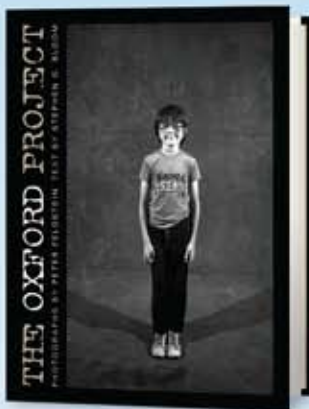


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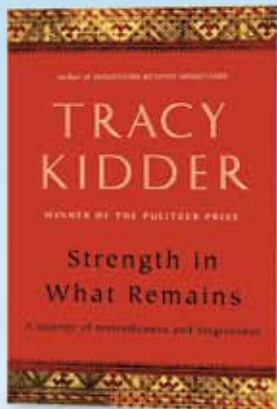
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Photographs by Peter Feldstein; Text by Stephen G. Bloom; Preface by Gerald Stern
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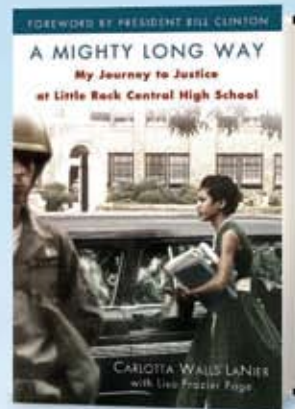
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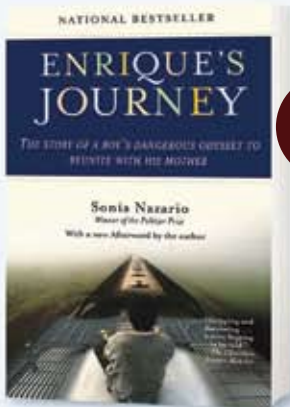


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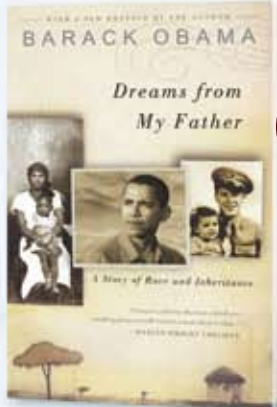
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A Story of Race and Inheritance

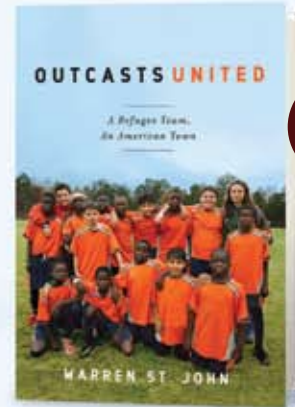
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