

CONGRESSMAN JOHN CONYERS, JR.

First District, Michigan

March 27, 1979

**TESTIMONY OF
REPRESENTATIVE JOHN CONYERS
ON MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. NATIONAL HOLIDAY LEGISLATION**
(Before a Joint Hearing of the Senate Judiciary
Committee and The House Census & Population Subcommittee)

A month ago, the 50th anniversary of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. took place. The passing of time ordinarily has a way of dulling or tarnishing the memory of our national leaders. Such has not been the case with the memory of Dr. King. In America's history he stands among a small number of great leaders for whom respect, affection, and admiration have grown with each passing year.

I come before the Senate Judiciary Committee and its distinguished chairman, Senator Edward M. Kennedy, to speak in support of legislation to make the birthdate of Dr. King — January 15 — a national public holiday. The Judiciary Committee of the Senate is to be commended in holding public hearings on the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Holiday Bill and in seeking to find the appropriate way to honor Dr. King.

Dr. King's Contribution to American Life

The sovereignty of the people is the central purpose of the American system of government. That purpose at various times in our history has manifested itself in public protest and petitioning of our government for the redress of grievances. Dr. King was the preeminent leader of popular political action in modern history. In practicing non-violent, direct action he embodied a great historical tradition — indeed, a great American tradition that originated with the Pilgrim's settlement in the 17th century, that continued with the Boston Tea Party on the eve of the American Revolution, and that in one form or another was exemplified in the public lives of Thomas Jefferson and Henry David Thoreau, among other Americans.

In all of his activities during the civil rights movement, Dr. King spoke for all people. "**Black and White Together — We Shall Overcome**" was Martin Luther King's credo to the last. It took some Americans a long time to recognize his credo, but it was finally acknowledged, as peoples throughout the world had acknowledged it from the beginning, when President Lyndon Johnson joined with him and the other participants of the civil rights movement. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that Dr. King help change the face of America. I am aware that the public holiday is an honor that, heretofore, has been reserved only for presidents and great national events. May I respectfully suggest that this honor also be conferred on Dr. King, who was the leader of the greatest modern example of popular political action in this country, the civil rights revolution.

The Heroic Dimension of Dr. King's Life

Martin Luther King, Jr. possessed extraordinary qualities. He was a deeply religious man, the son and grandson of two prominent ministers, at whose church — the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia — he too became a minister. His training in theology led from Atlanta's Morehouse College and Pennsylvania's Crozer Theological Seminary through the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard to Boston University, where he earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree. In his religious practice, in his preaching the social gospel — the teaching that it is man's duty not only to have faith, but also to serve others (according to Luke, "to heal the broken hearted, to free the captives, to set at liberty them that are bruised") — he helped transform the religious life of the American people and, indeed, of peoples throughout the world.

Dr. King's stature rests on many other qualities: a singular self-discipline and steadiness; an unshakable faith in the basic goodness of human beings; a single-minded dedication to raising up the lives of the disadvantaged; his inspiring and unforgettable speech; and exceptional courage. His politics was harnessed to an overriding moral force, as he led the Birmingham movement in 1963 to end legal segregation, the Selma movement to win full political rights, and the other campaigns of conscience in Montgomery and elsewhere to end segregation in public places, overcome housing and school discrimination, and win a better life for all people. History thrust the young minister into the leadership of the Montgomery bus boycott, after Rosa Parks, a young black woman, returning one evening from her work, refused to turn over her seat on the bus she was traveling. "If you protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love," Dr. King told the assembled at the first mass meeting of the 1955 boycott,

"when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, 'there lived a great people — a Black people — who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.'"

The combination of a few of these qualities would entitle any individual to a large measure of respect. Yet his greatness reached beyond even these qualities. The quality that above the rest touched the hearts of an entire world was his sense of hope, and his courage in acting on that hope, whatever the obstacles. In this he reached out to hundreds of millions of people whose lives were filled, instead, with suffering, disappointment, and despair. "This is our hope," Dr. King said on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in August, 1963,

"this is the faith I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. . . [and] transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."

In 1964 Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; the third Black person, twelfth American, and the youngest person ever to achieve this supreme world honor.

Going Beyond Being a Black Spokesman

In the last years of his life, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke out increasingly against the war in Vietnam. Many, including some of his closest advisors, questioned his judgment in getting involved in this most controversial issue of the day. "Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences," Dr. King said,

"as I have called for radical departures from the destruction in Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. . . Peace and civil rights don't mix, they say. . . I am greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling."

