

CONGRESSMAN JOHN CONYERS, JR.

First District, Michigan

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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 helped 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."

Dr. King was an opponent of the war because of its terrible cost in human lives, because it threatened to bring the United States and Soviet Union to the edge of nuclear war, and because it was destroying the promise held in "the war against poverty," as energies and resources were being diverted from that struggle to fight in Vietnam.

Dr. King refused to permit others to define the issues and the struggles that engaged his life. He refused to be typecast as a civil rights leader who had no business to question the government about its foreign policies. For him the civil rights struggle was inextricably linked to justice and peace. "I am still convinced," he said a few months before his assassination,

"that the struggle for peace and the struggle for civil rights as we call it in America happened to be tied together. . . I feel that the people who are working for civil rights are working for peace; I feel that the people working for peace are working for civil rights and justice."

The Civil Rights Movement and Justice

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s tireless efforts in the north and south were largely responsible for the vitality of the civil rights movement and the passage of the landmark civil rights laws in the 1960's. It may be said that his counsel influenced Presidents Kennedy and Johnson in moving them toward leadership on civil rights.

His last activity, before his death, was the Poor People's Campaign. "We have developed an underclass in this nation," Dr. King said in 1968,

"and unless this underclass is made a working class, we are going to continue to have problems. The bitterness is very deep as a result of these problems."

Civil rights was justice, and justice civil rights, to Dr. King, and justice was conceived in broad terms, including economic justice, the right to a job and the right to a decent wage for a job done well. He went to Memphis in April, 1968 to give his support to the sanitation workers who were calling for better conditions.

Dr. King and other ministers saw the need to create an institution that would be strong and respected enough to conduct the struggle for justice. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was conceived as that institution. Its cornerstone was the doctrine of non-violent civil disobedience, the willingness to call into question unjust laws, take responsibility for one's actions in doing so, but always to conduct the struggle on the highest moral and educational level. Many followers questioned whether change in America would come about non-violently. "We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline," Dr. King spoke at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963,

"We must not allow our creative protests to degenerate into physical violence. Many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. We cannot walk alone. We cannot turn back. . . No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Dr. King the Teacher

Like the great teachers before him, his guiding lights — Christ, Socrates, Gandhi — Martin Luther King, Jr. engaged individuals in a process of seeking after the truth, which necessarily was a process of seeking after the good. He was convinced of the basic goodness of individuals, but he also knew that ignorance was widespread and change, frightening. Many critics accused Dr. King of fomenting violence through his actions. They were unable to see that the tragic violence that occurred during the civil rights struggle did not arise out of the civil disobedience of Dr. King's movement, but out of the conditions of anger, antagonism, tension, and violence that existed very close to the surface of everyday life. In Dr. King's words, the tension that already existed had to be "exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured." "You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws," Dr. King wrote a group of clergymen as he sat in the Birmingham City Jail in April, 1963,

"This is certainly a legitimate concern. . . One may well ask: 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?' The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. . . in terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. . . One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty."

While in jail in Birmingham, Dr. King said he never felt more like being a full partner in the making of American law as when he was sitting in the Birmingham jail.

Lerone Bennett, the historian and Dr. King's biographer, has written:

"His grace, like Gandhi's, grows out of a complicated relation not to oppression, but to the ancient scourges of man, to pain, to suffering, to death. Men who conquer the fear of these things in themselves acquire extraordinary power over themselves and over others. . . Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. has taught us not only how to die, but also, and more importantly, how to live."

Commemorating Dr. King

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s memory is honored in a great many different ways, at home and abroad. Thirteen States, as well as most major cities in the United States, honor Dr. King either through public holidays or days of observance. In the 94th Congress both Houses came close to resolving to have a statue or bust placed in the Capitol. Because Dr. King's memory is honored by peoples throughout the world, his gravesite in Atlanta has become a national shrine at which world leaders have paid their respects.

In each Congress from the 90th Congress onward, I have introduced in the House of Representatives a bill to designate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a national holiday. This legislation already has 105 cosponsors in the 96th Congress. Similar legislation sponsored by Senator Birch Bayh has been introduced this year in the Senate, and has to date 19 cosponsors.

We ought to have a way to honor this human being and reaffirm the ideals he lived and died for. To honor him through a national holiday would also, of course, bestow a great honor on black Americans and represent another step forward in reconciling the lives and dreams of all the peoples who compose the American nation. Designating his birthdate a national holiday would create an event for all Americans. For Dr. King championed justice and liberty for all Americans. He exemplified a very special ideal in human history — the ideal of serving one's fellow human being in the ways of freedom and justice. In teaching us how to live in justice and in freedom, and how to die as well, he taught us a great deal, indeed.