



SUPPORT THE NATIONAL HOLIDAY

NATIONAL CITIZENS COMMITTEE

FOR A

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING HOLIDAY

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Dr. King's Legacy

By BAYARD RUSTIN

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I am strongly in favor of making Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a national holiday, but not for the reasons that are often given to justify such a momentous, indeed radical, departure from tradition.

The arguments I have heard from countless Blacks are all based upon Dr. King's extraordinary contribution to his people. There is also reference made to the psychological and symbolic significance of creating a national holiday in honor of a leader of a minority that has suffered so many centuries of oppression and discrimination.

I find these arguments compelling, but in the end they are not sufficient, for what is to prevent an Italian or a Jew or an Irishman from demanding similar recognition? One could argue, I think correctly, that these minority groups of Americans have not suffered nearly as much hardship as have Blacks, and that, therefore, creating a national holiday for Dr. King would be a form of just compensation for a people so sorely denied.

But I doubt that the majority of Americans could be convinced that it is fair to single out one minority group above all others for special treatment. Nor do I think that creating a national holiday for Dr. King would be an adequate form of compensation. It would be important as a symbol, but it would hardly do much to end discrimination and poverty. We should be

wary of purely symbolic gains because they may be taken by many people as a substitution for the real thing: namely, the kind of social, political, and economic equality that was the objective of Dr. King's struggle.

There is a much more basic reason for honoring Dr. King. More than any single individual, he was the symbol of racial reconciliation, and if the races in America are not reconciled with each other, this nation will not survive. The division between Black and white throughout American history forms the core of our national drama and, as Gunnar Myrdal pointed out long ago, is the central dilemma of American life. Dr. King's life, work, and death demonstrated the way to resolve that dilemma, and he should therefore be honored by the entire nation.

Dr. King was able to maintain a balance in his life that is absent in the romantic and often suicidal notions of many so-called revolutionaries and in the narrow world of conservatives as well. He saw that democracy was not a sham but a precious and fragile form of government, and that American society, despite its terrible injustices, could be changed through democratic struggle. His tremendous achievements restored the faith of millions in the democratic process.

Change For Better

He also saw that nonviolence was not only morally necessary, but the only form of social struggle that could change the society for the better. It offers a way for the

victims of society to be truly free, for it is at once an effective form of struggle and a guarantee that the victims will not become the new oppressors.

And Dr. King maintained his faith in integration throughout his life. The ideal of integration has been attacked from many sides in recent years, and yet the violence and the hatred that have been associated with these attacks have only proved how vital integration remains as an objective. Racial barriers can never lead to racial peace but only to endless conflict. Building a single society is not a choice but a necessity.

Dr. King was a man of love, and for that he was loved, hated and mocked. We should appreciate the spiritual side of his nature without sentimentalizing it, for he was also acutely aware of the economic context in which people live. He believed not only in brotherhood, but also in the redistribution of wealth, and he engaged in struggles toward that end. He recognized the need for a social and economic program without which we will never solve the basic problems of our society.

Dr. King was a man for all of us. He challenged what is worst in our society by appealing to what is best in our natures. Though he is no longer with us he still symbolizes our hopes and our ideals, the ideals of equality, freedom, and peace. By honoring him America would be doing justice to itself, for it would be creating a symbol—a day of national observance—of how we must behave toward one another if we are ever to realize the principles upon which this nation was established.

