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The History Of Martin Luther King Day

By Chad Hagy

Martin Luther King Day was created in honor of Dr. King and his contributions to society.

King was a leader during the Civil Rights Movement who encouraged minorities to stand up for their rights. His words still ring true today as they continue to inspire people of all races and creeds. However, there are some people who still view King as a threat and do not believe that King is worthy of a federal holiday.

Because of this, there is still controversy that surrounds Martin Luther King Day.

The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Born in Atlanta, Georgia on January 15, 1929, Martin Luther King, Jr. was the middle child of a reverend. He was an active member of his church and sang with his church's choir when he was 10 years old.

Five years later, King was accepted to Morehouse University after skipping two grades in high school. Within four years, he graduated from the College with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology before moving to a theology seminary in Pennsylvania.

King continued his collegiate studies until 1955. By the time he was 26 years old, he obtained two separate bachelor's degrees as well as a Doctor of Philosophy degree.

King's Role in the Civil Rights Movement

The event typically referred to as the starting point of the Civil Rights Movement occurred on December 1, 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat for a white passenger on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Parks was arrested for violating the Jim Crow laws. As a result, the head of the NAACP and Martin Luther King, Jr. supported a boycott of the bus company, dubbed the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

The boycott of the bus line lasted for over one year. During this time, Dr. King received many threats, his house was bombed and he was even arrested. His arrest resulted in the United States Supreme Court prohibiting racial segregation on public busses and transportation.

His most well-known achievement occurred in 1963 with the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The most prominent black activists and minority leaders gathered with thousands of others who supported the cause. During this event, Dr. King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech that he is remembered for.

During the following years, King went on to found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and preached non-violent resistance against the injustices that minorities were undergoing at the time. He felt that the non-violent disobedience would garner a great deal of media coverage, which would in turn lead to a feeling of sympathy in public circles.

King's Impact on American Society

Because of his views and efforts to equalize minorities into an otherwise "white" society, King was a hated figure during his day. When he went to Memphis, Tennessee in March of 1968 to support the black employees of the public works departments, he was assassinated while standing on the balcony of his

hotel room. Riots ensued during the following days and more than 300,000 people attended King's funeral less than a week later. The strike that he traveled to Memphis to support was also settled within days after he was killed.

King's impact defined the early 1960s. Through his efforts, blacks and minorities were eventually granted many rights that they might not have today were it not for Dr. King. The right to vote, the desegregation of public places and schools, labor rights and other basic rights were all promoted and granted because of his work. The Civil Rights act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 helped to cement these rights.

The Creation of the Martin Luther King Day Holiday

Martin Luther King Day was the third official federal holiday added to the calendar since 1900. Memorial Day and Veterans Day are the other two, which shows the level of significance that King had on the people and the government. Besides George Washington Day, Martin Luther King Day is the only other federal holiday that is designated to celebrate an individual.

The Martin Luther King Holiday was discussed only four days after King was assassinated in 1968. John Conyers, the Democrat representative from Michigan, proposed instituting a holiday to commemorate the man and the contributions he made to American society.

Designating a federal holiday would also bring attention to the other work King did, including the work he did with the labor unions in order to get fair treatment for workers of all backgrounds.

During the following decades, there was great pressure on the government to create a day of remembrance for Martin Luther King. It wasn't until 1980 when Stevie Wonder released a song entitled "Happy Birthday" that the pressure increased to a point where the government had to listen. In 1981, people held a Rally for Peace Press Conference and collected millions of signatures to ask Congress to create the proposed Martin Luther King Holiday.

Subsequent marches created mounting pressure until January 15 – Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday - was finally proposed as the new Martin Luther King Day. Many people in government and in the public sector opposed this day because it was too close to the Christmas and New Year's holidays. Instead, the third Monday in January was officially designated as the new Martin Luther King Holiday. Everyone embraced the holiday because it meant another three-day weekend and, as a bonus, it fell on the Monday after the Super Bowl.

On October 19, 1983, the Senate passed the resolution to create the Martin Luther King Junior holiday with a vote of 78-22. The bill was signed by Ronald Reagan and the holiday became official a few weeks later on November 2.

Controversy about the Holiday

Even with all of the contributions to our society and the Civil Rights movement, there are still people who dispute the validity of having a holiday to recognize Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Some senators, including Jesse Helms, a Republican from North Carolina, opposed the holiday because the FBI had information that would question King's character and moral conduct. He was also suspected to be a Communist. Helms demanded access to FBI records because he felt that there should not be a Martin Luther King Day if the man was not who he seemed. His request was denied.

Senator Helms also raised other arguments, stating that having a Martin Luther King Holiday elevated the man to the status of George Washington and that it was not right because King was not the only man involved in the Civil Rights Movement. In addition to this, many schools and businesses in the South do not close for Martin Luther King Day. Southerners and other people throughout the nation who have racial prejudices resent the fact that King was granted a day to recognize his efforts.

Although the holiday is not as widely accepted as others are, it is still important to recognize what King did for minorities and the nation as a whole. Even if your business or school does not take the day off in remembrance of Dr. King, take a few moments on this day to reflect on everything Martin Luther King Jr. achieved.

Are You A Woman Of History?

What kind of woman are you when it comes to living life to the fullest? Are you a woman of history who

likes a challenge with that slice of life that you have? Do you sit back and wait for life to happen? As life creates a series of events, are you proactive, encouraging a few more on your own? Perhaps your stance on life is to be reactive, waiting for something to spur you on towards movement. It is time to take a [quiz](#) and find the answer to the question, "Are You A Woman Of History?"

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