

MLK: Whatâ€™s in the Day?

Contributed by Wes Riddle
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The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. was born January 15, 1929. He was assassinated in 1968. “MLK Day” as it were, is celebrated the third Monday in January close to the time of his birthday. One may ask how such a short life should warrant a federal holiday. Martin Luther King, Jr. never was elected to public office. His life was controversial while he lived it. Moreover, his memory is skewed given that FBI files were sealed under court order until 2027. These records were not accessible to lawmakers, who voted for his holiday in 1983. The measure nevertheless passed with bipartisan support and by large margin before Ronald Reagan signed it into law.

Martin Luther King, Jr. still evokes an ecstatic memory from his admirers, and the man has become something of an icon too. That is to say, the representation of high ideals and idealism is separate and distinct from his actual biography. Of course the same can be said of many others, including Lincoln and Jefferson. Great men are often given a public pass on their blemishes and shortcomings. Historians are or ought to be a bit more circumspect.

The reason for the Day, and celebrating the life of MLK involves the issue of race. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s work was important in achieving a Second Reconstruction so-called, i.e., the end of segregation and the application of rights past state laws based upon the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

Martin Luther King, Jr. attended segregated public schools in Georgia. After that he went to Morehouse College in Atlanta and then to Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. At Crozer he was elected president of a predominantly white senior class. He then proceeded to Boston University where he earned his Ph. D. in 1955 and met his wife Coretta Scott. They would have two sons and two daughters together.

After educational and professional preparations, King launched himself into the pastorate first in Montgomery, Alabama and then in his native Atlanta, Georgia. At the same time he dedicated himself to political activism throughout the South, in order to end “Jim Crow” discriminatory statutes. As a member of the executive committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) he led the Montgomery bus boycott lasting 382 days. This led to a Supreme Court decision ending bus segregation. During the days of the boycott, King was arrested and subjected to personal abuse, and his home was bombed.

In 1957 he was elected to head the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, from which he provided new leadership for the burgeoning civil rights movement. King employed the teachings and techniques of Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi. His enduring success is largely attributable, however, to skilful adaptation of widely accepted American values, including the rule of law—albeit, through aggressive non-violence; as well as strong appeal to common spiritual beliefs, especially in the South, about God and the moral worth and dignity of man, and to Christian values of forbearance and brotherly love. His historicism was Lincolnesque and so helpful, in that he emphasized the text of the Declaration of Independence, characterizing that document as a promissory note as yet unfulfilled. Thus he appealed to American patriotism, while strongly criticizing social norms regarding race.

In the eleven year period from 1957 to 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr. traveled more than six million miles, gave over twenty-five hundred speeches, wrote five books and numerous articles, consistently preaching against racial hatred and injustice. His activity is largely credited with changing the conscience of America on the subject of race. In 1963 he directed a peaceful march on Washington, D.C. of 250,000 people and delivered perhaps his finest address, “I Have a Dream” from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. In 1965 he led 30,000 people on a march from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery, where he demanded that black people be allowed to vote without unfair restrictions. The speech televised to a national audience, as well as the Selma march and various protests he orchestrated, stirred general unrest in the South and American cities, leading to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In 1964 he became the youngest man to have received the Nobel Peace Prize, turning over that considerable cash prize to the furtherance of civil rights. The iconic ideal he articulated at the Lincoln Memorial is still one of the highest domestic hopes in the land. It has come to define what we mean by a just equality. Speaking of his four little children, he said “I have a dream that … one day” they “will live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

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