

Holiday's origin was overdue

This is an abridged version of an article that appeared in The Seattle Times on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday in 1985 - a year before the first celebration of the holiday in his honor.

By Paul Andrews
THE SEATTLE TIMES

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who knew it takes time for attitudes to change, would not have been surprised that nearly two decades were required to make his birthday a legal holiday.

If anything, King, whose magnificent dream always had a pragmatic cast, would have been surprised that it has happened at all.

Even putting aside King's controversial career and his minority race, the odds against the new holiday were imposing. The arguments opposing it - cost to taxpayers, singling him out over others - have been used for decades to resist creation of any new holiday.

HIS BIRTHDAY IS TODAY. The official holiday, on the third Monday of January, begins next year. To place the new date in some perspective, consider:

It is the first new holiday since 1948, when Memorial Day was created as a "prayer for peace" day. And it's only the third this century (the other is Veterans Day, created as Armistice Day in 1926 to honor those who died in World War I). King is the only American besides George Washington to have a national holiday designated for his birthday (those of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Robert E. Lee and others have been celebrated in some states but not nationwide).

Internationally, King is one of the few social leaders of any country to be honored with a

holiday (Mahatma Gandhi's birthday is observed in India). Such status by a member of a country's racial minority is almost unheard of. Generally, the honor is reserved for military or religious figures.

Given such obstacles, the holiday is a powerful tribute to King's philosophy and stature.

"As is usually the case with great figures, particularly controversial ones who are fighting for a philosophy condemned by many, Dr. King was well ahead of his time," says Joseph Lowery, King's contemporary counterpart as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta. "Even those very much opposed to him during his lifetime have come to see that segregation, injustice and militarism are concerns which must be

addressed by modern society."

When President Reagan signed legislation creating the holiday in November 1983, it marked the end of a persistent, highly organized lobbying effort spanning the nation for 15 years.

"We worked hard to put together a national effort and make a powerful network," recalls Cedric Hendricks, legislative aide to Rep. John Conyers, Michigan Democrat. It was Conyers who, four days after King was assassinated in Memphis, submitted the first legislation to commemorate his birthday.

Petitions carrying more than 6 million signatures - said to be

the largest petition drive in history - were submitted to Congress in 1970. With help from New York Democratic Rep. Shirley Chisholm, Conyers resubmitted the legislation during each congressional session.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which coordinated the petition campaign, also kept continuous pressure on Congress for the holiday. Mass marches in 1982 for voting rights and 1983 to mark the 20th anniversary of King's dramatic speech in Washington, D.C., also contributed.

It took bipartisan support to overcome
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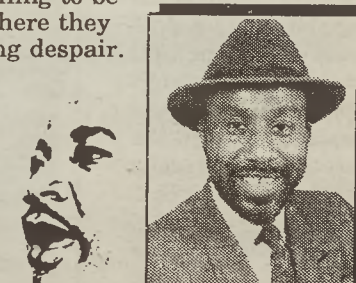
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