

Holiday long time in coming

Continued From 7C

the opposition of Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., who labeled King a Communist, and President Reagan' lukewarm attitude toward the legislation, Lowery said.

In the final analysis, what may have sealed approval of the holiday was a compromise offered by Rep. Katie Hall, Indiana Democrat who marshalled support in the House for the legislation. Hall, responding to criticism that the holiday would be too close to the Christmas-New Year's week, moved its observance to the third Monday of the month. The notion of a three-day weekend, plus the fact that the third Monday often follows Super Bowl Sunday, helped put the measure over the top, supporters say.

Arguments concerning money dominated opposition to the holiday. Costs associated with lost services on the King holiday were estimated at \$18 million for the federal government; at \$7 million to Washington state; at \$1.18 million to Seattle. The estimated total was an astronomical \$8 billion for government and private sector combined.

"Every time we'd bring the bill up in the Legislature, people would say, '\$7 million! Are you kidding?! What about all the people starving in the streets?'" recalls Washington state Sen. George Fleming, Seattle Democrat, who has led legislative efforts since the early 1970s.

Another common argument, Fleming notes, was "why put Dr. King above other famous people?" They didn't think his legacy would stand the test of time."

Both arguments,

Fleming feels, are used to conceal racist resistance to the holiday.

Most holiday proposals encounter strong opposition, particularly today. Moreover, just about every constituency has some day it would like to commemorate. Feminists have long fought for a Susan B. Anthony Day on the suffragist's birthday Feb. 15. The Irish would prefer to have St. Patrick's Day off, the Finns St. Urho's Day (March 16). Tree lovers and environmentalists can make a case for Arbor Day to be an official holiday. Commercial interests push Valentine's Day.

While legislation supporting these holidays has never gotten beyond the lip-service stage, special interests have created a number of holidays not univer-

sally observed. Longshoremen, for instance, take off Harry Bridges' birthday to honor the popular labor leader. In the South, Robert E. Lee's birthday has long been observed by various states on the third Monday of January. This creates an interesting historical contradiction for those that, like Virginia, are adding observance of King's birthday to that date as well.

Not specifically patriotic or religious, the King holiday does not fit any traditional category. But black leaders hope it will become a deeply spiritual day.

"I think it should be devoted to some activity which expresses love of our fellow person, or spiritual recognition of some kind," says Dr. Donald G.

Phelps, chancellor of Seattle Community College District, which for the past 11 years has conducted a widely attended memorial service in King's honor on his birthday. "As we've celebrated it in the past, it's become a day where more people come together in an King's principles, which are really American principles in their truest form.

"It shouldn't be a holiday where we all go fishing."

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