

**Walt Gable Comments on Martin Luther King Day
January 19, 2009**

History is indeed made up of significant events which shape our future and outstanding leaders who influence our destiny. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s contributions to our nation's history are an important part of that history.¹ We all know some things about Martin Luther King, Jr.—things such as that he was a black civil rights leader; that he used the tactics of civil disobedience (or passive resistance) that had been popularized by Mahatma Gandhi; that he won the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize; and that he was tragically assassinated. Well, today, we have this national holiday as a time for this nation to remember the injustices that Dr. King fought. It is a time to remember his fight for the freedom, equality, and dignity of all races and peoples. It is a time to remember the message of change through nonviolence.²

On November 2, 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed the legislation enacting the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday. This legislation established the third Monday in January as Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday. It became an official federal holiday starting with the third Monday in January in 1986. It was not, however, until 2006 that it was officially observed in all 50 states. In 1994, President Clinton signed legislation to make this King Holiday a day of citizen action volunteer service in honor of Dr. King.³

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, has had this to say about the meaning of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday:

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday celebrates the life and legacy of a man who brought hope and healing to America. We commemorate as well the timeless values he taught us through his example—the values of courage, truth, justice, compassion, dignity, humility and service that so radiantly defined Dr. King's character and empowered his leadership. On this holiday, we commemorate the universal, unconditional love, forgiveness and nonviolence that empowered his revolutionary spirit.

We commemorate Dr. King's inspiring words, because his voice and his vision filled a great void in our nation, and answered our collective longing to become a country that truly lived by its noblest principles. Yet, Dr. King knew that it wasn't enough just to talk the talk, that he had to walk the walk for his words to be credible. And so we commemorate on this holiday the man of action, who put his life on the line for freedom and justice every day, the man who braved threats and jail and beatings and who ultimately paid the highest price to make democracy a reality for all Americans.

The King Holiday honors the life and contributions of America's greatest champion of racial justice and equality, the leader who not only dreamed of a color-blind society, but who also led a movement that achieved historic reforms to help make it a reality....

The King Holiday commemorates America's pre-eminent advocate of nonviolence—the man who taught by his example that nonviolent action is the most powerful, revolutionary force for social change available to oppressed people in their struggles for liberation.

This holiday honors the courage of a man who endured harassment, threats and beatings, and even bombings. We commemorate the man who went to jail 29 times to achieve freedom for others, and who knew he would pay the ultimate price for his leadership, but kept on marching and protesting and organizing anyway....

Every King holiday has been a national “teach-in” on the values of nonviolence, including unconditional love, tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation, which are so desperately needed to unify America....The Holiday provides a unique opportunity to teach young people to fight evil, not people, to get in the habit of asking themselves, “what is the most loving way I can resolve this conflict?”...

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is not only for celebration and remembrance, education and tribute, but above all a day of service....It is a day of volunteering to feed the hungry, rehabilitate housing, tutoring those who can't read, mentoring at-risk youngsters, consoling the broken-hearted and a thousand other projects for building the beloved community of his dream.⁴

Each year, since the first celebration in 1986, this national holiday has had a specific theme. This year's theme is “Remember, Celebrate, Act, A Day On, Not a Day Off,” reminds all to champion our diversity and celebrate the hard won freedoms as Dr. King intended.⁵ On August 11, 1957, in Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. King gave a speech known as his “Conquering Self-Centeredness” speech. In that speech he said,

An individual has not started living fully until they can rise above the narrow confines of individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of humanity....Every person must decide, at some point, whether they will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness. Life's most persistent and urgent question is, What are you doing for others?⁶

During the 1950s and '60s, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized the power of service to strengthen communities and achieve common goals. Initiated by Congress in 1994, King Day of Service builds on that that legacy by transforming the federal holiday honoring Dr. King into a national day of community service grounded in his teachings of nonviolence and social justice. The aim is to make the holiday a day ON, where people of all ages and backgrounds come together to improve lives, bridge social barriers, and move our nation closer to the “Beloved Community” that Dr. King envisioned. With thousands of projects planned across the country, the 2009 King Day of Service on January 19 promises to be the biggest and best ever!⁷

It will be interesting to see if Barack Obama in his presidential inauguration speech tomorrow has something to say about Martin Luther King, Jr. I bet Obama will refer to the great legacy that King has left us. I would add that without the efforts of King

it would not have been possible for Barack Obama to have become our 44th President in January 2009.

Now let me give you a brief biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. His father was the pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. His mother Alberta was a schoolteacher. He entered Atlanta's Morehouse College at age 15. He was ordained as a Baptist minister at age 18. He earned a Ph. D degree in theology in Boston—that is why he is often referred to as Dr. King. He emerged as a leader of the American civil rights movement because of his efforts in organizing the famous 1955 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama.

I want to explain this event in detail, as it is so important to King's life. To begin, it was on Thursday, December 1, 1955, that Rosa Parks was sitting in the front-most row for black people on a bus being driven by James F. Blake. When a white man boarded the bus, Blake told everyone in her row to move back to create a new row for the whites. All of the other blacks complied, but Rosa refused. She would later explain that she was just too tired from her day's work to get up and move. Rosa was arrested for failing to obey the bus driver's seat assignments—a violation of a city ordinance. That night, the Women's Political Council circulated word about what had happened. The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was headed by a new young minister in Montgomery—that minister new to Montgomery was Martin Luther King, Jr. The MIA under King organized a citywide boycott of public transit. This boycott continued until on November 13, 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a federal district court ruling that Alabama's racial segregation laws for buses were unconstitutional. In that Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr. had been jailed for 2 weeks when he and 155 other protesters were arrested for "hindering" a bus. This arrest brought national attention to the protest. King commented on the arrest by saying, "I was proud of my crime. It was the crime of joining my people in a nonviolent protest against injustice." This Montgomery bus boycott result in the U.S. civil rights movement receiving one of its first victories and gave Martin Luther King, Jr. the national attention that made him one of the prime leaders of this cause.⁸

I describe this event in such detail because I want you to realize that this event became such a crucial turning point in the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. and that it was simply because he was the newest minister in Montgomery that he had been chosen to be the head of the Montgomery Improvement Association. That coincidence completely changed his life and probably the entire course of the black's civil rights movement. I would say that the civil rights movement would have been far different—and probably far less successful in the same number of years—without the leadership of King.

Continuing on with his biographical narrative, in early 1957, Dr. King was elected president of the newly-formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In April 1963, he wrote his moving "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" following his arrest during one of the sit-in demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama.⁹ One of the famous quotes from that letter is "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people."¹⁰

King delivered his most famous speech on August 28, 1963—his “I Have a Dream” speech. His speech was the closing speech of the Washington, D.C. rally known as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedoms. In the presence of 250,000 people, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King said these things (I am quoting portions of this famous speech):

In a sense we have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness....

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”...

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today....

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last! free at last” thank God Almighty, we are free at last!¹¹

On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law, with Dr. King present. Many analysts have said that King helped mold much public support for this great law, which had been first proposed by John Kennedy. This Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed racial segregation in schools, public places, and employment.¹²

On December 10, 1964, Dr. King received the Nobel Peace Prize. At the age of 35, he was the youngest man to have received this award. He donated the prize money for the furtherance of the civil rights movement.

King continued to his civil rights efforts, contributing greatly to the passage of more federal legislation such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He also became involved in other issues such as opposition to the Vietnam War and the poor of all races.

Tragedy struck on April 4, 1968, when Dr. King’s life was ended by an assassin’s bullet while he was on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee.¹³ The assassin was James Earl Ray. King is buried in Atlanta, Georgia, next to the Ebenezer Baptist Church and near his boyhood home.

Currently there are continuing efforts to raise the necessary funds to erect a Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. This memorial will have three themes—justice, democracy, and hope. About 108 million dollars has been raised towards the estimated 120 million dollars cost.¹⁴ Donations are being accepted either online or through the mail. I have this information.

Tomorrow a truly historic event will take place when Barack Obama is inaugurated as our 44th U.S. President—the first black American achieving this honor. I expect that Obama will refer to Martin Luther King, Jr. in his inaugural speech. It is impressive to say the least that a black man is becoming our nation's 44th president just 44 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Imagine the pride and joy that Martin Luther King, Jr. would have had he been able to witness this landmark achievement of the dream that King expressed so vividly in August 1963.

I want to begin to conclude my remarks by pointing out that this is the first time that I have prepared a speech for use on Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday. Yes, I taught extensively about King in my high school U.S. history and government classes, but I didn't focus in specifically on this one day. Some might say how can a white American really tell the story of this famous black American? My response to that kind of thinking is that it is simply not what is the real message of King's tireless efforts to promote social justice and unity in this country. So, I feel comfortable about my speaking about King, and I thank the staff of this facility for asking me to come do this program for you today rather than the first Monday of the month on some topic of my choosing. (By the way, I plan to reschedule my presentation on my 2007 China trip for my program with you the first Monday in February.)

Let me finally close with these words that one person used to pay tribute to Dr. King:

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., minister, civil rights leader, intellectual, social reformer, author, recipient of countless accolades and awards, winner of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, parent and charismatic leader seeking peace in the volatile social transformation taking place in America during the 1950's and 1960's—was suddenly taken from this earth at the hands of an assassin's bullet on April 4, 1968. This solitary man, within a span of thirteen years, did something that changed the way America viewed and treated a portion of its citizens, who were historically faced with racist, restrictive laws as part of their daily living.

Americans of African descent were forced into an unconditional status as second class human beings. Dr. King was the catalyst for the removal of this loathsome status. His vision and leadership was holistic and grounded upon the principles of nonviolence. The power of his message and the appeal of his movement brought thousands of people of goodwill, both Black and White, to his camp. His life was in constant danger, as well as the lives of his family and those who worked in his movement.¹⁵

I have brought some pictures for you to look at. If you simply look at these pictures and especially the ones with quotes, I think you will see how great a reformer and humanitarian that Dr. King was. He left us a legacy of inspiration.

Also, I am hoping that some of you will have something to say about Dr. King. For example, do you remember, like I do, what you were doing when he was assassinated?

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- ¹ Comments of Professor Melvin Sylvester in 1968—see <http://www.liu.edu/cwis/cwp/library/mlking.htm>
- ² <http://www.holidays.net/mlk>
- ³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King,_Jr._Day
- ⁴ “The Meaning of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday” by Coretta Scott King—see <http://www.thekingcenter.org/holiday>
- ⁵ http://www.zwire.com/site/printerFriendly.cfm?brd=1659&dept_id=8103&newsid=20235685
- ⁶ <http://www.king-raleigh.org/splash.htm>
- ⁷ <http://www.mlkday.org>
- ⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montgomer_Bus_Boycott
- ⁹ <http://www.liu.edu/cwis/cwp/library/mlking.htm>
- ¹⁰ “Martin Luther King, Jr. Quotations,”—see <http://www.infoplease.com/spot.mlkquotes1.html>
- ¹¹ <http://www.usconstitution.net/dream.html>
- ¹² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_Rights_Act_of_1964
- ¹³ <http://www.liu.edu/cwis/cwp/library/mlking.htm>
- ¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King,_Jr._National_Memorial
- ¹⁵ Comments of Professor Melvin Sylvester in 1968—see <http://www.liu.edu/cwis/cwp/library/mlking.htm>