

News from Senator

BOB DOLE



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DOLE ON MARTIN LUTHER KING BILL:

A "HOLIDAY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE"

WASHINGTON -- Senator Bob Dole (R-KS), Chairman of the Judiciary Subcommittee on the Courts, will today manage the Senate floor debate on H.R. 3706, legislation to designate the birthday of the late Martin Luther King, Jr., as a legal, public holiday.

Following is the statement of Senator Dole:

A nation defines itself in many ways; in the promises it makes, and the programs it enacts, the dreams it enshrines or the doors it slams shut. A great nation defines itself in poetry as well as politics, in its heroes and in its holidays.

Carl Sandburg defined America. "The people of the earth," he wrote, "the family of man wanted to put up something proud to look at, a tower from the flat land of earth on up through the ceiling into the top of the sky."

From her birth in the furnace of the revolution, America was designed as an exercise in applied idealism. She would inspire other people who loved liberty and hungered for justice -- or else she would become just one more straggler in history's long parade, a nation addicted to temporal power and corrupted by personal pride. Fortunately, that has not happened. We have not adjourned our covenant with each other, nor have we grown tired of the old, ringing words that proclaim equality under the law and promise better times ahead to anyone who would invest his own individual bit of divinity into the life struggle.

When we have been slow to keep the promise, men and women have stood up and pricked our national conscience. "It is never too late to give up our prejudices," said Thoreau. "Be as beneficent as the sun or the sea," proclaimed Emerson, "but if your rights as a rational being are trenched on, die on the first inch of your territory." And there was Lincoln, the patron saint of my party and the greatest testament to democratic government we have produced. "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. Whatever differs from this," he said, "to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."

Lincoln was a controversial man. Abe Lincoln presided over the deaths of a million of his countrymen. They did not die, nor did he, to preserve, protect and defend the status quo.

Freedom -- An American Standard

Now as then, America is a country about rights. Take that away, and what is left? Yet rights, as we learned more than two hundred years ago, are not always handed down from above. They must sometimes be forced by pressure from below. The process of forcing can disturb the peace. It can shatter the placid calm of tradition. But such is the price that society must pay for living up to its own high standards.

As we forged a new nation at Concord and Lexington, Saratoga and Yorktown, so we welded it together at Bull Run and Gettysburg, projected it on to the world stage at Chateau-Thierry, seized for it the moral high ground at Anzio and Guadalcanal -- and renewed its historic status as the last best hope of human freedom in our own time . . . at Selma and Montgomery, Birmingham and Atlanta, Chicago and Washington.

Nothing less than a new American revolution raised our consciousness and made us ask questions of ourselves -- questions delayed or simply avoided for far too long. Questions that went to the heart of what America thinks of herself and offers her own citizens. Questions put with eloquence and irrefutable force by a man whose birthday we seek to make a national holiday -- not to honor him alone, nor even the millions who marched and prayed and demanded our attention when some of us would have preferred to look elsewhere. We seek to honor Martin Luther King's idea, an idea as old as the New England Town Meeting, and yet as endangered in the modern world as the dignity of man himself.

"Segregation," he wrote, "is the offspring of an illicit intercourse between injustice and immorality."

Yet in the same year that I first came to this Congress, no black man or woman could share a whites-only lunch counter in an Atlanta department store.

Injustice anywhere, said Dr. King, was an injustice everywhere. Yet in those same years, millions of black Americans were denied equal access to the voting booth, decent housing, a good job."

"We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters," said Dr. King, "and righteousness like a mighty stream" -- and some people called him a radical for quoting the Book of Amos.

But in America, the home of the brave and the land of the free, it was segregation that was radical, denial of opportunity that was revolutionary, and the smothering of individual hope that was an affront to decency. Thanks to Dr. King more than anyone else, America renewed her alliance with true democracy. She listened to the voices of her own oppressed. She caught the rhythm of their suffering, and she brought it in from the streets to the halls of Congress and the centers of power. She wrote new laws to strike down old barriers. She built bridges in place of walls. She invited the black man and woman into the mainstream of American society -- and in doing so, opened the way for women, the disabled, and other minorities who found their own voice in the civil rights movement.

A Holiday for all the People

Some will oppose this legislation because they say it would cost too much. It might cost \$18 million or \$173 million, or even in the billions, we are told. But let's assume for the moment that they are accurate. Since when did a dollar sign take its place atop our moral code? And to those who worry about cost, I would suggest they hurry back to their pocket calculators and estimate the cost of three hundred years of slavery, followed by a century or more of economic, political and social exclusion and discrimination.

Others will contend that Dr. King was too controversial a figure to merit such a tribute. They forget that George Washington himself was called a tyrant during his second term in office. Or they suggest that this added holiday is somehow the exclusive property of black Americans. That is like saying that Columbus Day is exclusively for Italian-Americans, or Labor Day reserved for union members. In my opinion, we can all profit from a day of national reflection on the faith that binds together a diverse people, and a chance to measure our own adherence to that faith.

We propose to celebrate Dr. King's birthday because his work -- which in reality must be our work -- is unfinished. Since he first commanded national attention, legal obstacles to voting, fair housing and employment have fallen. The number of black elected officials has multiplied more than tenfold. The number of black kids pursuing a college degree has doubled in a decade, and incomes of young black couples have nearly reached parity with their white counterparts.

But much remains to be done. A dream has yet to be fully realized. And that brings me to my final point.

Justice is Non-Partisan

The pursuit of equal opportunity is a drama without intermission. Its cast is proudly non-partisan. My own support of this legislation is nothing new; I take some pride in having been one of its original sponsors back in 1979. As a Republican, I can never forget that it was my party that originally struck the shackles from black Americans. As a Republican, I am appalled by waste -- financial, to be sure, but human even more. In achieving economic and social emancipation, in putting an end to the waste of human talent and potential, Republicans have contributed much, not least of all our votes when crucial bills came before this body.

For there is nothing partisan about justice. It is as conservative as the Constitution, as liberal as Lincoln, as radical as Jefferson's sweeping assertion that all of God's creation is equal in his eyes. So let us not congratulate ourselves simply because the cattle prods and police dogs of the 1960's have vanished from our streets. Instead, let us acknowledge more subtle forms of discrimination wherever they exist, and pledge anew to root them out, inspired by the example of a man of God and an authentic hero to tens of millions of Americans, black and white.

It is too late to bring him back -- and much too late to be debating his impact or inspiration. With this vote, we can show to the world that, while a man may have died in Memphis, his message lives on. Both deserve official recognition, on our calendars and in our priorities.