

BOB

"If you would test a man's character, then give him power."

Abraham Lincoln

In the mouths of some politicians, risk is a four letter word. We all like to minimize political dangers. There are times when personal conviction yields of necessity to constituent demands. But whenever self-interest comes into conflict with self-respect, it's a good thing to remember that while you only face the voters on election day, you have to look yourself in the mirror every morning.

Few issues in my congressional career have stimulated more intense feelings than a hotly debated bill making Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday a federal holiday. I'm a conservative Republican; King was a liberal Democrat. But the ideals I fought for in the mountains of Italy forty years ago are no different from those King defended on the urban battlefields of Birmingham and Selma.

Of course King was controversial. So, during their stormy lifetimes, were Washington, Lincoln and Jefferson. Opponents of the bill argued that a federal holiday would be too expensive. But what about the human cost of three centuries of slavery, followed by a hundred years or more of systematic discrimination?

As the bill's floor manager, I led off the debate on October 3, 1983 by placing the King holiday in its historical context. It wasn't one man alone whom we would honor each January 15, but the continuing hold of compassion and non-conformity over the American mind.