



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on January 15, 2016

Martin Luther King Day Based on MLK's Image, Not Reality

Former New Hampshire Governor Meldrim Thompson wrote a letter to President Ronald Reagan in the fall of 1983, urging the president to veto any bill creating a national holiday for civil rights figure Martin Luther King, Jr.

Reagan's response highlights the problem of anyone expressing any opposition to a King holiday then — and even more so today:



On the national holiday you mentioned, I have the reservations you have, but here the perception of too many people is *based on an image, not reality. Indeed to them, the perception is reality.*

[Emphasis added.]

The image and perception of King is of a man who opposed affirmative action, believing in equality of opportunity, and not government quotas. And all through non-violence.

Today, many conservatives cite King so much that one might get the impression that he was a conservative Republican. Historian Thomas Woods directly addressed this problem in his book *33 Questions About American History You're Not Supposed to Ask*:

The way some conservatives tell it, King believed in an absolutely color-blind approach to racial issues and policy in America. Instead of calling for massive government programs and preferential policies in favor of blacks, King simply demanded of white America that it view individuals on their merits rather than in the light of racial prejudice.

Although it should be admitted that King was a man of great courage and powerful oratorical skills, a review of his life reveals that the image Americans now have of him is not reality.

Perhaps this misperception derives from the famous "I Have a Dream" speech King delivered in Washington, D.C. in August of 1963. Hardly any conservative American would find any of the speech objectionable. King declared,

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down at the table of brotherhood 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.

Despite King's noble and stirring rhetoric (no doubt drawing upon his background as a Baptist



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preacher), the reality is that he was no libertarian, dedicated to the free enterprise system.

Near the end of his life, King became more open about his radical philosophy. At the 10th anniversary convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he called for the “restructuring of the whole of American society.” He told the attendees that the millions of poor people in America should raise “questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy.”

Other less positive aspects of his life also should be better known.

For one, although known as a Baptist preacher, King had expressed doubts about fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. Once during Sunday School when he was only 13 years old, he challenged the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He later conceded that the Bible also included “many profound truths”; however, later he was attracted to the “social gospel” propounded by Walter Rauschenbusch, which stresses good works and social causes instead of Christian doctrines such as individual salvation.

King obtained his Ph.D. in 1955 from Boston University. His dissertation, “A Comparison of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman,” has since been judged to have been partially plagiarized. Following an academic inquiry conducted in 1991, university officials declined to revoke King’s doctoral degree, instead simply adding an attachment to his dissertation in the university library which noted the problems associated with it.

The philosophy of non-violent civil disobedience of Gandhi, the Hindu monk, and the American political philosopher Henry David Thoreau (who wrote *On Civil Disobedience* in the 19th century) greatly influenced King. He believed his goals would more likely be achieved with a non-violent approach.

King became a national figure during the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, precipitated by the arrest of Rosa Parks for her refusal to give up her bus seat to a white man. Contrary to what many today believe, however, this was not a spontaneous act on the part of Parks, but part of the plans of King, Parks, and others to challenge the city ordinance which required blacks sit at the back of the bus. During the 385 days that the boycott lasted, King’s house was bombed and he was arrested.

In contrast to black radicals such as Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and others who called for violence to achieve social equality in American society, King appeared much more moderate.

King’s advocacy for peaceful change was well and good, but his economic views were certainly left-wing. He kept these beliefs largely quiet until near the end of his life in 1968, but he had supported democratic socialism for several years, and he called for government redistribution of wealth. “A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth,” King asserted. He told Coretta Scott (later to be his wife) in a 1952 letter that he was “much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic.” He later said that America should move toward a “better distribution of wealth.”

“No amount of gold could provide an adequate compensation for the exploitation and humiliation of the Negro in America down through the centuries. Not all the wealth of this affluent society could meet the bill,” King said in *Why We Can’t Wait*. Yet he did believe that there should be a “massive program by the government of special compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement.”

Comparing his proposal to what America did for war veterans in the G.I Bill, he stated that the country should “launch a broad-based and gigantic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged, our veterans of the long siege of denial.”



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King lost much support in 1967 when he came out against the Vietnam War at Riverside Church in New York City. There, he called the U.S. government “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.” He added that he opposed the war in Vietnam because it diverted money away from social welfare programs. Even the left-wing *Life* magazine was shocked by the speech, referring to it as “demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi.”

But with his assassination on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone to show support for the city’s sanitation workers (mostly black) during a strike, it became politically problematic to oppose the creation of a national holiday for King.

Escaped convict James Earl Ray, a white man, was charged with the murder, and he eventually confessed to the crime. But Ray later recanted this confession, and like the 1963 John F. Kennedy assassination and the attempted assassination of Alabama Governor George Wallace in 1972, doubts continue to this day as to just what is the full story of the King assassination.

In 1971, St. Louis, Missouri established King’s birthday as a holiday, followed by several other cities and states. Pressure grew for Congress to create a national holiday, with insinuations that any opposition to a King holiday was “racist.” At a news conference in 1983, President Reagan was asked whether he would sign the bill creating a federal holiday to honor King. His response was that he would, because “the symbolism of that day is important enough.” He added that he did not fault “the sincerity” of those who wanted FBI files on King released first, which would help answer the concerns that King was a communist, or at least associated with communists.

When asked if he agreed with the accusations some had made that King was a communist sympathizer, Reagan responded, “We’ll know in about 35 years, won’t we?” — referencing the time when he thought the files on King would be released.

Actually, it was in 1977 that the FBI surveillance files on Martin Luther King, Jr. were sealed — for 50 years. So in 2027 we *should* know what is in those documents concerning King’s alleged associations with communists, although it is doubtful that the complete files will ever be released.

However, it is clear that the creation of a federal holiday for Martin Luther King, Jr. was to satisfy political pressure and maintain an image — one not completely accurate. However, that image is so set in the minds of the American public that no politician today would dare repeat any damning facts about him.

But even former chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Julian Bond said in 2010 that the person whom Americans celebrate on the third Monday of January is not the real Martin Luther King, Jr., but an “anesthetized” version of the man.

Bond, who was a student of King’s, told an Internet news program the day after MLK Day in 2010,

We’ve transformed him into kind of a cut-leaf figure, someone who had a dream and spoke those magnificent words, but we don’t remember the King who was a critic of capitalism.

Bond added that King favored a “modified form of socialism” for the United States.

This was not the first time that the left-wing Bond had challenged the modern image of King. In the April 3, 1993 *Seattle Times*, he said about King, “We have stripped his life of controversy.” According to Bond, King said, “There must be a better distribution of wealth.... We can’t have a system where some of the people live in superfluous, inordinate wealth while others live in abject, deadening poverty.”

In a 1965 interview with *Playboy* magazine, King was asked if he felt it fair to request a multibillion-



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dollar program of preferential treatment for blacks, or any other minority group. King was unequivocal:

I do. Can any fair-minded citizen deny that the Negro has been deprived? Few people reflect that for two centuries the Negro was enslaved, and robbed of any wages — potential accrued wealth which would have been the legacy of his descendants. All of America's wealth today could not adequately compensate its Negroes for his centuries of exploitation and humiliation.

It is not that Bond disapproved of King's radicalism and support for wealth redistribution — but because so few Americans knew the whole truth about King — that he said, "It may be that ... one reason he is so celebrated today [is] *because we celebrate a different kind of man than really existed.*" (Emphasis added.)

Steve Byas is a professor of history at Hillsdale Free Will Baptist College in Moore, Oklahoma. His book, History's Greatest Libels, is a challenge to some of the great lies of history told about some of the great heroes of history, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Christopher Columbus, and Joseph McCarthy.

Correction: Due to an editor's mistake, this article as originally published erroneously reported how long it would be before FBI surveillance files on Martin Luther King sealed in 1977 would be unsealed. The files are supposed to be unsealed in 2027. — Editor



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