
Presidential Documents

Title 3—

Proclamation 6861 of January 12, 1996

The President

Martin Luther King, Jr., Federal Holiday, 1996

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

Our country's motto, "E Pluribus Unum"—out of many, we are one—charges us to find common values among our varied experience and to forge a national identity out of our extraordinary diversity. Our great leaders have been defined not only by their actions, but also by their ability to inspire people toward a unity of purpose. Today we honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who focused attention on the segregation that poisoned our society and whose example moved our Nation to embrace a new standard of openness and inclusion.

From Montgomery to Birmingham, from the Lincoln Memorial to Memphis, Dr. King led us to see the great contradiction between our founders' declaration that "all men are created equal" and the daily reality of oppression endured by African Americans. His words have become such a part of our moral fabric that we may forget that only a generation ago, children of different races were legally forbidden to attend the same schools, that segregated buses and trains traveled our neighborhoods, and that African Americans were often prevented from registering to vote. Echoing Abraham Lincoln's warning that a house divided against itself cannot stand, Dr. King urged, "We must learn to live together as brothers, or we will perish as fools."

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call for American society to truly reflect the ideals on which it was built succeeded in galvanizing a political and moral consensus that led to legislation guaranteeing all our citizens the right to vote, to obtain housing, to enter places of public accommodation, and to participate in all aspects of American life without regard to race, gender, background, or belief.

But despite the great accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement, we have not yet torn down every obstacle to equality. Too many of our cities are still racially segregated, and remaining barriers to education and opportunity have caused an array of social problems that disproportionately affect African Americans. As a result, blacks and whites often see the world in strikingly different ways and too often view each other through a lens of mistrust or fear.

Today we face a choice between the dream of racial harmony that Martin Luther King, Jr., described and a deepening of the rift that divides the races in America. We must have the faith and wisdom that Dr. King preached and the convictions he lived by if we are to make this a time for healing and progress—and each of us must play a role. For only by sitting down with our neighbors in the workplace and classroom, reaching across racial lines in our places of worship and community centers, and examining our own most deep-seated beliefs, can we have the honest conversations that will enable us to understand the different ways we each experience the challenges of modern life. This is the peaceful process of reconciliation that Dr. King fought and died for, and we must do all we can to live and teach his lesson.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, WILLIAM J. CLINTON, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim January 15, 1996, as the Martin Luther King, Jr., Federal Holiday. I call upon the people of the United States to observe this occasion with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this twelfth day of January, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and ninety-six, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twentieth.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "William J. Clinton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "W".

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