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## Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, 1988

*By the President of the United States of America*

### A Proclamation

Twenty years ago this coming April, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was slain by an assassin in Memphis, Tennessee. Violence and hatred, the enemies against which he offered an uncompromising message of brotherhood and hope, had claimed another victim in a decade of tumult that plumbed the very spirit of this Nation. Martin Luther King was martyred not only for his beliefs, but for the passionate conviction and consistency with which he espoused them. That those convictions prevailed, that his dream of the death of bigotry did not die with his life's ebbing, offered immutable confirmation of his fervent belief that "unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality."

Martin Luther King's leadership was of the same character as his dream. It was larger than personality and broader than history. It bore the stamp of the religious tradition that formed his early life and led him to an assistant pastorate at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta at age 18. It took anchor in what he called the "magnificent words" of the Declaration of Independence and in the Constitution, words he echoed and to which he so often appealed in his speeches and writings against the cruelty and irrationality of segregation and prejudice. His was leadership that spoke to the best in every person's nature and that never failed, even in the face of curses and threats, iron bars and police lines, to turn men's eyes toward "the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice."

Arrested in a march for desegregation on Good Friday, 1963, Martin Luther King wrote from the Birmingham City Jail of his faith in this ultimate dawning of equality: "We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. . . . If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands." Those demands, he saw, were claims to the original promise of the truths our Founders proclaimed "self-evident"—that "all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," among them the "rights to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." He called these words a "promissory note to which every American was to fall heir," and he insisted that what was centuries overdue could no longer be delayed.

Martin Luther King's words were eloquent because they were borne not by his tongue alone but by his very being; not by his being alone but by the beings of every one of his fellow black Americans who felt the lash and the sting of bigotry; and not by the living alone but by every generation that had gone before him in the chains of slavery or separation. He brought light to the victims of segregation, but he brought light as well—in a way, illumined by faith, more sorely needed—to its perpetrators. He saw how evil could crush the spirit of both the oppressor and the oppressed, but whereas "unearned suffering" was redemptive, those who were motivated by hatred and inflicted pain had no recourse but to abandon the instruments of prejudice and to change heart.

Through his evocation, by his words and his presence, of transcendent ideals, Martin Luther King pierced to the heart of American society and changed it, irrevocably, for the better. He, and all those who marched with him, overcame. As they did so, so too did the America that Lincoln had said could not stand divided—transmuted now through the toil and blood of its fallen heroes into a land more wholly free. The work of justice and freedom continues, but its goal is less distant, its hardships more tolerable, and its triumph more sure. For these gifts to our Nation, during his lifetime and in the decades past and to come, all Americans join in fitting celebration of the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr.

By Public Law 98-144, the third Monday in January of each year has been designated as a public holiday in honor of the "Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr."

NOW, THEREFORE, I, RONALD REAGAN, 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 Monday, January 18, 1988, as Martin Luther King, Jr., Day.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this 12th day of January, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-eight, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twelfth.

*Ronald Reagan*