Martin Luther King Jr. Day

U.S. Holidays
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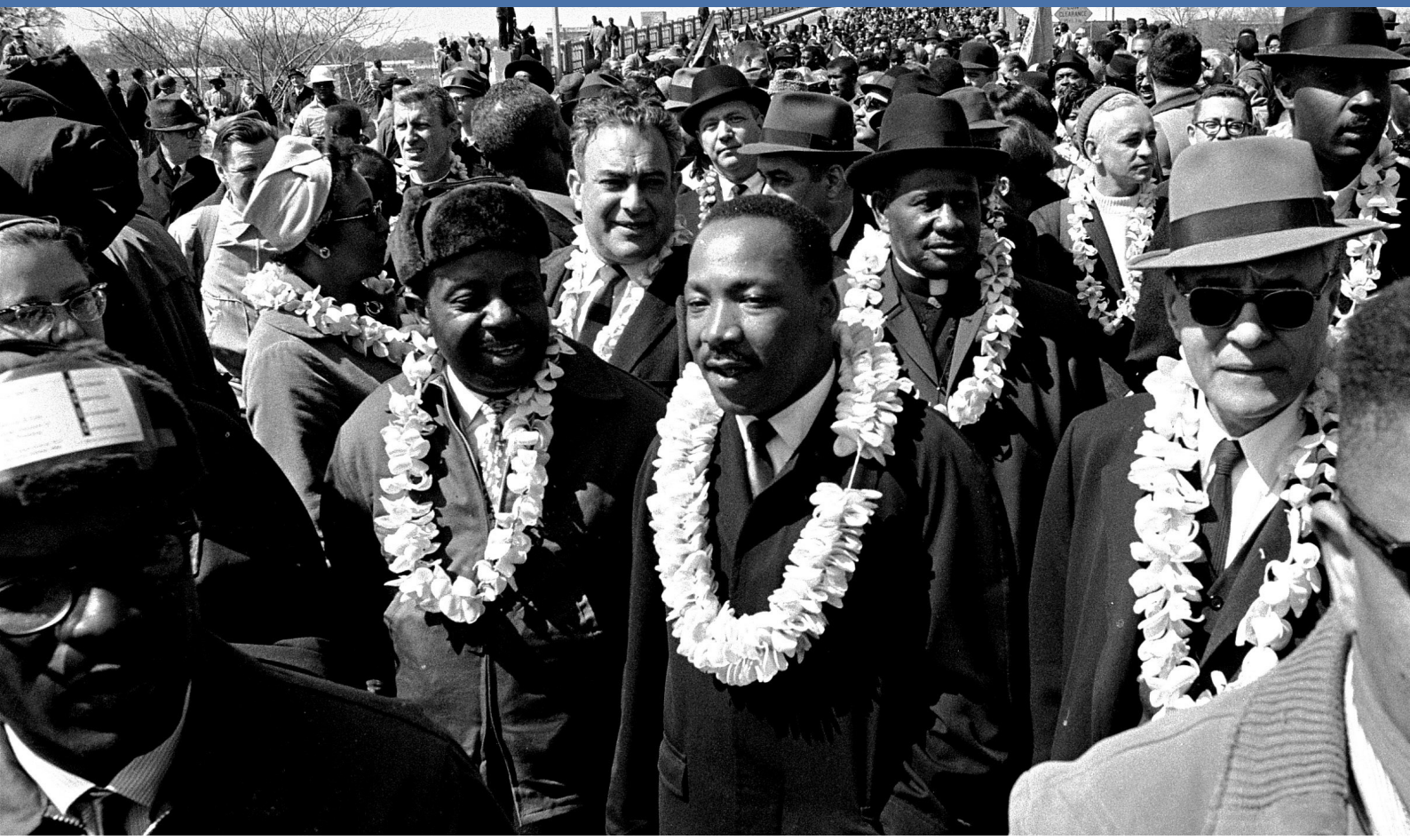


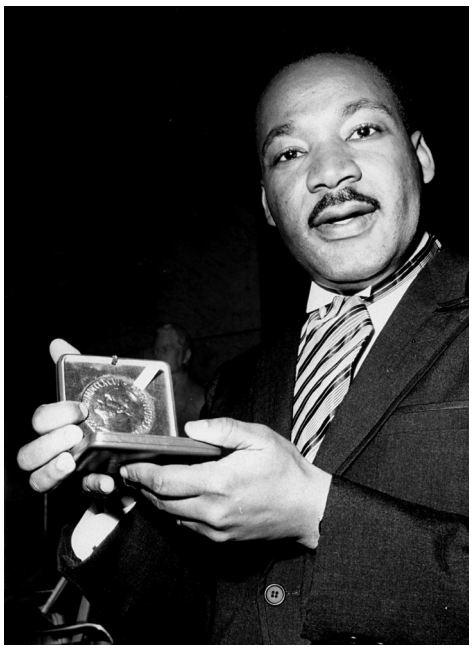
A Day To Serve Others

Martin Luther King Jr. once said: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: 'What are you doing for others?'" Each year, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Americans attempt to answer that question by performing community service.

Born on January 15, 1929, King became a Baptist minister and devoted his life to ensuring equal rights for African Americans and other minorities. King's work caught the attention of the entire world, creating what he called a "coalition of conscience," which helped change American society and create new U.S. laws protecting civil rights.

King fought for the rights of African Americans in all aspects of American life. For example, he protested laws that required blacks to give up their seats to whites on public buses. In 1955, he led a boycott of the public bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, that lasted 385 days. It ended with a U.S. district court ruling that ended racial segregation on all Montgomery public buses. And in August 1963, King led hundreds of thousands of civil rights supporters in a march on Washington. It was at this event that King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and delivered his celebrated *I Have a Dream* speech in which he said, "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.'"

In 1964, King became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his work to end racial segregation and racial discrimination. He used his prize money to further the objectives of the civil rights movement.



Top: In 1965 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (center) led a 50-mile march in Alabama to protest discriminatory voter registration laws. Inset: In 1964 Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for promoting the principle of nonviolence in the civil rights movement.

PHOTOS, TOP: AP PHOTO
INSET: AP PHOTO

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In addition to being a champion for the civil rights of African Americans, King advocated for the rights of workers. In 1965, King said: "The labor movement [in the United States] was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, government relief for the destitute and above all new wage levels that meant not mere survival, but a tolerable life."

King believed that all labor has dignity and that economic justice was a critical component for civil rights reform. In a 1968 speech, King asked: "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?"

On April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of his motel room in Memphis, Tennessee, King was assassinated by James Earl Ray, a white supremacist with a long criminal record. King had been in Memphis to lead a protest march in sympathy with striking sanitation workers of that city.

A campaign to honor King began soon after his death. In 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed legislation making the third Monday of January each year a national holiday to commemorate King. In 1994, the U.S. Congress designated the King holiday as a national day of service, calling on Americans from every walk of life to help realize King's vision of a "beloved community" by volunteering their time and effort to help others.

Top: Dr. King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech to a crowd of 250 thousand people at the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963. Bottom: President Barack Obama encourages Americans to observe Martin Luther King Jr. Day by undertaking community service. In 2011, he marked the national holiday by helping to paint a school lunchroom.

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PHOTOS, TOP: AP PHOTO
BOTTOM: AP PHOTO/J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE