Honoring the Dishonorable: A Comparison of Two Federal Holidays

Since 1870, the United States Congress has distinguished eleven days of the year as federal holidays, each intended to highlight a specific aspect of American history that molded the nation into its current state. Although these celebrations are frequently referenced as “national holidays,” they are technically applicable only to federal employees and the District of Columbia – states decide their legal holidays individually. The existing federal holidays generally aim to instill a feeling of civic pride in American citizens, connecting the nation through the common struggles and accomplishments of its past. Almost without exception, approval of the eleven federal holidays transpired only after many futile attempts; a total of 1,100 petitions have ensued since the idea of a federal holiday was introduced. Given the meticulous effort and argument involved in creating a federal holiday, one might assume that each would be fairly neutral and pertinent to all citizens. However, because these holidays essentially symbolize the moments in history which the United States most greatly values, several are fiercely debated due to interpretations of their underlying implications. Columbus Day has been at the forefront of this controversy since its official establishment in 1968; citizens have expressed frustration that Christopher Columbus receives such an honor despite the history associated with his name, and many states have even ceased to recognize this holiday. As observed when contrasted with Martin Luther King, Jr. Day – the only other federal holiday explicitly named in honor of a historical figure – Columbus Day officially recognizes neither a virtuous person nor virtuous events, subsequently blurring modern society's notion of the past; the connotations of this celebration are simply too immoral for the United States to continue celebrating the holiday as it does today.

The life of Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of the most well-known in United States history. The iconic figure of the Civil Rights Movement was born on January 15, 1929 into a family rooted in Georgia, where extreme segregation, discrimination, and racial violence were near their peak of the century. King was both a minister and a civil rights activist, famous for achieving his goals without resorting to violence. The activist is best known for his “I Have a Dream” speech, which
he gave on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963 in front of a quarter million people participating in the March on Washington, the largest civil rights demonstration in the history of the United States at the time. In 1964, 35-year-old King became the youngest man in history to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Four years later, on April 4, 1968, King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee by James Earl Ray, who strongly opposed what Martin stood for, fought for, and achieved.

Before and during King’s short life, civil rights was a preeminent crisis throughout the United States. Since the abolition of slavery, African-Americans were oppressed from establishing themselves in American society and from having access to the same “pursuit of happiness” that white individuals seemed intrinsically born with. King is often considered to have been the uniting force behind the national movement that ultimately established the federal laws that began to lay the foundation for African-American parity in the United States. A newspaper article published the day after the 1963 March on Washington articulated that “the huge demonstration had the aura of a large country fair until the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke. It was [he]… who transformed the day from an outing to a crusade. It was King who gave the protesters a mission and the nation a goal.” Just a few days after this revolutionary march, despite that a newspaper reported that “Mike Mansfield [along with many other Congressmen] was not certain that the speech would speed passage of civil legislation,” Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which essentially legalized discrimination based on race, color, gender, religion, or national origin. This act is not the only piece of monumental legislation that King stimulated. The activist also avidly fought for the legal rights for African-Americans to have more access to voting; in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, King was arrested with 770 others for picketing a county courthouse for the elimination of discriminatory voting requirements. Right before the chaos, King famously said, “If Negroes could vote, there would be no oppressive poverty directed against Negroes, our children would not be crippled by segregated schools, and the whole community might live together in harmony.” King’s powerful words along with arguably his most famous arrest once again drove citizens to unite and fight even more avidly for equality. King’s actions during this event therefore indirectly spurred civil legislation, most notably the Voting Rights Act passed later the same year, which fundamentally prohibited racial discrimination in the voting process.
It is no wonder, then, that King was thought of as not only the leader of the Civil Rights Movement but also the hero of his generation. Led by King, the Civil Rights Movement was “probably the greatest revolution that America has ever seen,” according to Ken Johnson, president of the Southern Regional Council. According to an editorial published in 1983, the year that Martin Luther King Day was finally established, King “set the pattern for the civil rights demonstrations that would result in passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.”19 These two major laws, both of which King helped instigate, guaranteed African-Americans access to public accommodations, voting booths, and jobs.20 An abundance of other federal legislation followed these two, ending discrimination in housing and offering a range of federal programs to put oppressed blacks on an equal playing field with whites.21 These laws represent the most tangible impact that King had on the United States.

American citizens knew that King was no ordinary leader, and a Nobel Peace Prize simply did not seem enough recognition. Just four days after Martin Luther King, Jr. was fatally shot, Congressman John Conyers, Jr., (D-Mich.) introduced legislation authorizing the president to designate January 15 as “Martin Luther King Day.”22 Another keen proponent of this legislation was Senator Edward Brooke, (R-Mass.).23 He believed similarly in this idea, pleading the president to call “on the people to commemorate the life and the service to his country and its citizens of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Junior.”24 Although this legislation was quickly shut down, Conyers, Brooke, and thousands of others were not deterred: legislation to make January 15, King’s birthday, a national holiday was introduced every single year following the reverend’s death.25 During one debate about the annual legislation in 1979, subcommittee chairman Robert Garcia spoke in favor of the bill, noting that it “would serve as an appropriate testimonial to an extraordinary individual who dedicated his life to the cause of human rights.”26 Impassioned arguments such as this one arose in the House each year to no avail despite Congress’ enduring passivity to take action.

After fifteen years of the holiday’s being proposed and rejected, The King Center, a foundation established to honor and perpetuate the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., interceded.27 The Center called for and mobilized a conference to commemorate the 19th anniversary of the March on Washington, and a coalition was subsequently formed to lobby for the holiday bill.28 Later that year, Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s wife, presented a petition to Speaker Tip O’Neill (D-Mass.) that bore six million signatures.29 It was then that Congress began to turn
itself around. Republican Conference Chairman Jack Kemp, who had voted against the measure in 1979, explained his change of heart: “I have changed my position… because I really think that the American Revolution will not be complete until we commemorate the civil rights revolution.”

After the House and the Senate passed the measure with surprisingly large margins – the final tally was 78-22 – on November 2, 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed into law a bill designating the third Monday in January as a federal holiday in memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. Just before he signed the bill, Reagan commented, “Dr. King awakened something strong and true, a sense that true justice must be colorblind. Now our nation has decided to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by setting aside a day each year to remember him and the just cause he stood for.” Reagan’s signature marked a victory not only for those who fought for the establishment of the holiday but for those who fought alongside King during those tumultuous years of the Civil Rights Movement.

Despite its name, Martin Luther King Day is not an isolated piece of legislation extolling a single man. It marks “a racial chapter in the United States that has been closed forever,” as Conyers argued in the Congressional debates of 1983. It corroborates the Civil Rights Movement, a palpable victory for African-Americans and activists across the nation. It is an indication of the United States’ continuing commitment to make every member of its land equal. It is a reminder of what the United States values in a citizen; as Coretta Scott King remarked, “[King] symbolized what was right about America, what was noblest and best, what human beings have pursued since the beginning of history.”

King was an epitome of a leader and thus of a citizen, causing change not through violence but through the words that he spoke and the protests that he inspired. The holiday represents America’s ever-changing perspective and how “Americans recognized a grave injustice and took action to correct it,” as Reagan mentioned before he signed the holiday’s bill. Despite those who never thought it would be passed, despite that it took fifteen years to enact, Martin Luther King Day was established. Therefore, in more ways than one, the holiday recognizes the accomplishments that perseverance can have, demonstrating “that unearned suffering is redemptive,” as Reagan articulated. The holiday honors both King and a dream that once seemed unattainable but now gradually nears reality, as observed through the legislation passed during and after the activist’s life.

The second of the only two federal holidays that celebrate individual figures in United States history is Columbus Day. Christopher Columbus, born in the early 1450s in Italy, was recognized with this holiday for sailing across the Atlantic Ocean and “discovering” America as
we know it today, paving the way for Spanish colonization. Columbus originally proposed to the Spanish crown that he travel to the East Indies for economic, imperialist, and religious purposes, yet he landed on an archipelago in the Bahamas on his first voyage in 1492. Over the course of three more voyages, Columbus returned to many areas in modern day America, laying a foundation for the historical development of the Western world by conquering the territories he came across and enforcing European customs on their native people.

Compared to that of Martin Luther King Day, the establishment of Columbus Day was unceremonious. The holiday was unofficially recognized in a variety of manners since the actual event of Columbus’ arrival in America, so President Roosevelt decided to create the first federal observance of the holiday in 1937. Years later, because the celebration already seemed deeply rooted in American culture, Congress decided in 1968 that Columbus Day should be instituted as an official federal holiday.

Despite the seemingly obvious choice to add Columbus Day to the growing list of federal holidays, the persona, actions, and repercussions of Columbus himself all point to a glaring immorality that coincides with celebrating Columbus Day. For those living in America during 1492, Columbus’ arrival was catastrophic. Although the conqueror initially said that he would convert the indigenous people “to our holy faith rather by love than by force,” he neither made significant attempts to convert natives to Christianity nor treated them with any form of respect. Columbus viewed the natives he encountered not as equals but as inferiors, saying that “they should make good servants... for it appeared to me they had no creed.” Columbus designed and enforced the encomienda system, which assigned Spaniards a group of indigenous people to rule over and to be responsible for. This system made Indians slaves to the land that was stolen from them, legally placing them in complete submission to their conquerors. Due to Columbus’ brute force and inhumanity, 1492 marked the beginning of slavery and the eventual genocide of millions of indigenous people. What was freedom, hope, and opportunity for the Europeans was the beginning slavery, oppression, and genocide for others.

Columbus’ appalling treatment of indigenous people is not the only flaw with his holiday. Not only did the conqueror actuate the torture and death of millions, but Columbus Day itself was founded on and continues to perpetuate misconceptions of history throughout the United States. When President Roosevelt presented his reasoning for enacting the first federal observance of Columbus Day, he spoke these words:
The courage and the faith and the vision of the Genoese navigator glorify and enrich... the early movement of European people to America. This year, when we contemplate the estate to which the world has been brought by destructive forces, with lawlessness and wanton power ravaging an older civilization... we can revitalize our faith and renew our courage by a recollection of the triumph of Columbus after a period of grievous trial.\textsuperscript{47}

If put in perspective of historical events, Roosevelt’s speech exudes irony. Roosevelt essentially recommended that the United States celebrate Columbus Day due to the voyager’s “courage,” “faith,” and “vision” and because he believed that recalling Columbus could help revive American loyalty. The president viewed Columbus as oppressed by the Spanish crown, yet Columbus was responsible for the oppression of millions. The president said that remembering Columbus could inspire spirits in a world “with lawlessness and wanton power,” yet Columbus used these very tactics to conquer what is now the United States. Not only was the president misinformed about the truth behind the story of Columbus, but modern citizens are as well, partially due to the institution of Columbus Day.\textsuperscript{48} Charlene Teters, a Native American citizen, recalled that, during her education about Columbus, "Teachers told stories of brave settlers, untamed lands, and savage, uncivilized Indians. To this day, [American Indian History]... remains largely ignored or distorted in most American schools."\textsuperscript{49} Many historians have described Columbus’ coming to the United States as a simple “discovery,” when in reality it initiated colonization driven by legalized slaughter and economic profiteering. The way history is presented can change a country’s perspective on any matter or any person; therefore, the celebration of Columbus Day only further establishes an inaccuracy that has so rooted itself in American culture that its government glorifies a man who “feels to us [Indians] like... Hitler,” as Teters expressed.\textsuperscript{50}

For these reasons and more, Columbus and the events associated with him present too great a moral dilemma for the United States to recognize them with a federal holiday; this discrepancy is easier to comprehend when Columbus Day is contrasted with Martin Luther King Day. First and foremost, the men whom these two holidays honor represent drastically different values. King dreamed of equality for all, while Columbus dreamed of prosperity for only a select few. King was the leader of a movement that earned millions their rights, while Columbus was the leader of a movement that robbed millions of theirs. King strived for non-violence to achieve his goals, while Columbus resorted to insurmountable brutality to achieve his. Indeed, Columbus demonstrated courage and ingenuity in his conquest; he defied the odds and laid a foundation for what is now the United States, but these traits and accomplishments cannot overshadow the man himself and
the tactics he utilized. Unlike Columbus’, King’s actions alone did not comprise his impact on the United States: the activist altered not only the condition of his nation but the mindset of its citizens. As Coretta Scott King remarked when Reagan signed Martin Luther King Day into law, “[King] taught us that only peaceful means can bring about peaceful ends. America is a more democratic nation, a more just nation, a more peaceful nation because [of] Martin Luther King, Jr.”

King reminded the United States of the American dream, and he left the country with the task of actualizing his own dream, one of equal opportunity for every citizen. The United States can still learn from the life and values of King, yet it has no more to gain from honoring Columbus than it did when the conqueror passed away in 1506.

It is no exaggeration that Christopher Columbus and Martin Luther King, Jr. each changed the course of American history. Without Columbus, the United States might not have evolved into its current condition as efficiently as it did. Without King, 20th century African-Americans might not have obtained civil rights as quickly or as successfully as they did. But that one man is honored for his righteousness while the other is indirectly honored in the same way for his barbarity with what Coretta Scott King called “the highest recognition which this nation [can] bestow” is simply incongruous. If the name of a federal holiday is any indication of what Americans should celebrate on that day, the United States can no longer justify observing Columbus Day. The nation must not deem it necessary to celebrate the very roots of its establishment, as these roots are entangled with harsh immorality and racism; a light-hearted celebration of these events hazards the chance of obscuring painful aspects of American history. Rather than celebrate what has been named the origin of the United States, let the true history of this period of colonization be known so that citizens can reflect on the destruction of cultures and the genocide that is too often concealed. Finally, let the United States honor only those who deserved to be honored, who represent what the nation stands for and what it should strive to become.
2. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 902.
15. Ibid., 930.
16. Ibid., 930
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
36 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
43 Christopher Columbus, "Columbus on the Indians 'Discovery' of the Spanish, 1492," in Major Problems in American Indian History, ed. Albert L. Hurtado and Peter Iverson, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), [57].
44 Ibid.
45 Selwood, "Columbus, Greed, Slavery, and Genocide," The Telegraph (blog).
46 Charlene Teters, "Whose History Do We Celebrate?," in Major Problems in American Indian History, ed. Albert L. Hurtado and Peter Iverson, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), [492].
47 Roosevelt, "Statement on Columbus Day," speech.
48 Teters, "Whose History Do We Celebrate?," in Major Problems in American, [492].
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 King, "Coretta Scott King Remarks," in Historic Documents of 1983, [888].
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