

**“Living the Dream”:
A History of the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday**

by

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Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act of 1968.

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Abstract

On 2 November 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday into law. His signature ended a fifteen year struggle to make King's birthday a Holiday. Advocates for the Holiday, such as Coretta Scott King, Representative John Conyers and Senator Ted Kennedy planned to honour not only King, but the entire civil rights movement that famously confronted the 'American Dilemma' of institutionalised racism in the 1950s and 1960s. The Holiday was seen as an act of atonement for centuries of racism, slavery and segregation that stretched back to the American Revolution. It honoured the African American contribution to American life and celebrated racial integration and nonviolence.

After the first King Holiday in 1986, scholars Vincent Harding, Michael Dyson and David Garrow argued that it relied too much on King's 'I Have a Dream' speech. They wrote that King's radical legacy was forgotten and that conservatives sought to downplay his criticism of militarism and economic inequality. Scholars were correct to note this trend, yet since 1986 little has been added to this analysis, even as scholars heed the call by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall to study the Long Civil Rights Movement. Most who write about King Day focus on the 1970s and early 1980s Holiday campaign and this thesis builds on their work by analysing Holiday celebrations in the mid-to-late 1980s and 1990s.

In 1984, Congress established the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday Commission in order to organise King Day. Led by Coretta Scott King, the Commission planned ten King Holidays from 1986 to 1996. It left a vast, but underutilised, archive for scholars. This thesis is based on research in that archive and presents a new understanding of how the King Holiday was celebrated.

This thesis is a history of the Holiday and the Commission. It addresses the questions: Why was King celebrated with a Holiday; who celebrated; and how? It analyses who organised the Holiday and what images of King they promoted. The thesis argues that King's 'I Have a Dream' speech symbolised celebrations in the 1980s because the Commission attempted to create a popular Holiday. This meant that King Day had a moderate and even conservative tone, made possible because many appointed to the Commission were conservatives. Yet, in the mid-1990s, during President Clinton's administration, a new image of King was presented to the public: King the Drum Major. This image was based on King's 'Drum Major Instinct' sermon and emphasised King's humility, dedication to service and concern about economic inequality.