

History: The Fight for MLK Day

A Holiday Worth Fighting For



Did you know that Martin Luther King Jr. Day wasn't always a holiday? After Dr. King passed away in 1968, many people wanted a special day to honor him. They wanted a **federal holiday** so the whole country would stop to remember his work for civil rights.

However, it took 15 years of arguing, marching, and voting before the government finally said "yes." It wasn't until 1983 that the law was signed, and 1986 when it was first celebrated.

Federal Holiday	A special day recognized by the US government where offices and schools are often closed.
Bill	A proposal for a new law that is discussed and voted on by Congress.
Petition	A written request signed by many people asking leaders to change something.
Rally	A large public meeting to support a cause or idea.

The Song That Changed History ♪♪

In the early 1980s, the fight for the holiday was stuck. Many politicians voted "no." They thought it would cost too much money to give workers a day off, or they didn't think Dr. King was important enough.

The famous musician **Stevie Wonder** wanted to help. He didn't just give a speech; he wrote a song! He released "Happy Birthday" in 1980. It wasn't just a party song; the lyrics argued that there should be a law to celebrate Dr. King. He went on a tour to perform the song and held huge rallies.

Word bank: awareness, petition, politicians, rejected, music



Before Stevie Wonder helped, many _____ had voted against the holiday. Stevie Wonder used his _____ to reach young people who might not listen to speeches. He helped gather millions of signatures for a _____, which is a list of names asking for change. His song spread _____ about the cause, making it impossible for the government to ignore.

Timeline of the Struggle

Look at the key dates below to see how long the process took.

Year	Event
1968	Dr. King is assassinated. Representative John Conyers introduces the first bill to make his birthday a holiday.
1979	The bill is finally voted on in the House of Representatives, but it loses by 5 votes.
1981	Stevie Wonder holds a Rally for Peace in Washington D.C. They deliver a petition with 6 million signatures!
1983	President Ronald Reagan signs the bill into law.



Math Check: Use the table above to answer the question below!

1. **How many years passed between the first bill being introduced and the President finally signing it into law?**

- a) 5 years
- b) 10 years
- c) 15 years

	d) 20 years
2. Why was the petition in 1981 so important?	a) It showed that millions of regular people wanted the holiday. b) It was a song that everyone liked to sing. c) It cost a lot of money to mail to the President. d) It was the first time anyone had asked for the holiday.

Understanding the Opposition



Today, it seems obvious that we should celebrate Dr. King. But in the 1970s and 80s, people gave many reasons to say "No."

Word bank: expensive, tradition, private

1. Some people argued it was too _____ because paying government workers to stay home costs millions of dollars.
2. Others said Dr. King was a _____ citizen, not a president or general, and usually only presidents got holidays.
3. Some people simply did not want to break _____ or celebrate a leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

Your Voice

Stevie Wonder used a catchy song to get people's attention. Think about a cause or change you care about.

Why do you think music and art (like Stevie Wonder's song) can be more powerful than just asking nicely or writing a letter?

Answer Key

The Song That Changed History ♪♪

Cloze:

Before Stevie Wonder helped, many **politicians** had voted against the holiday. Stevie Wonder used his **music** to reach young people who might not listen to speeches. He helped gather millions of signatures for a **petition**, which is a list of names asking for change. His song spread **awareness** about the cause, making it impossible for the government to ignore.

Timeline of the Struggle

Multiple Choice:

1. 15 years
2. It showed that millions of regular people wanted the holiday.

Understanding the Opposition

Gap Fills:

1. Some people argued it was too **expensive** because paying government workers to stay home costs millions of dollars.
2. Others said Dr. King was a **private** citizen, not a president or general, and usually only presidents got holidays.
3. Some people simply did not want to break **tradition** or celebrate a leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

Your Voice 🎤

Possible answers: Music sticks in your head, it makes people feel emotions, it brings people together at concerts, radio plays it so many people hear the message.