

Text of Stevie Wonder's speech advocating a national Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday, January 15, 1981, Washington, D.C.

Welcome ladies and gentlemen. It is beautiful that we should all come together today for such an important purpose, and I want to thank you all with all my heart for remaining here today. For even though it is freezing cold and snowing and there are jobs to be done and money to be made, you have found the time, the energy, the necessary resources, the heart and the courage to step forward as Americans and as human beings on this day to seek a more full recognition for a great man and the great principles he has lived, fought, and died for. I am, of course, referring to our quest to make Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a legal holiday.

It is fitting and proper that we should gather here for this purpose in Washington DC, the nation's capital, for it was almost two decades ago that some of us and many of our parents, families, friends and allies gathered for that now historic occasion, the march on Washington. Indeed, it is fitting that we should gather here, for it was here that Martin Luther King inspired the entire nation, indeed the world with his stirring words and his lofty vision, both challenging us and inspiring us with his great dream.

And even though he has since passed away, the words he spoke are still as vital and alive and true as the day he spoke them. For the words he spoke can never get old or die, or wither away, for they spring from that vast eternal ocean of great principles that have been the teachings and hallmark of all the heroic messengers of mankind down through the ages: the message of peace, of basic human dignity and freedom.

No assassination, no repression, no technological overkill can kill these great and classic values. They live forever in the hearts of free people everywhere, and for all time. It is because he best represents these principles that Martin Luther King is such a heroic figure. A man of his time. A man for all seasons. Certainly, a man America can be proud of. The depth of his compassion and of his courage cannot help but uplift us and move us to a greater understanding of ourselves, and of the need to unite into a melting pot of one.

Now there are those who say, all well and good. Dr. King was a great man. But, on national holidays we honor only presidents and great events, why honor Martin Luther King? He wasn't an elected official; he was a rabble rouser and a disruptive force in the social fabric of American life. To those we say: Public

holidays in the United States should be, and normally are, reserved for celebrating great traditions in the nation's history and our highest ideals and leaders who have shaped our common destiny.

Dr. King lived and died for this nation's ideals of justice, honor, dignity and freedom. By practicing non-violent citizen acts, he embodied the best of the American political tradition with the original pilgrims of New England, continuing on with the Boston Tea Party and right through the American Revolution. Martin Luther King and the founding fathers had more than their basic equity as men in common. They were men of vision and courage. They were about the business of making a noble dream a reality and they have made our lives all the better because of it.

And though Dr. King was a great man, he was no saint. He was a man, a human being. And being no less ourselves, we should accept no less than what Dr. King fought for: a commitment from this nation to make available to all its citizens, the equality of opportunity to pursue the American dream of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness with regard to the shackles of race, creed or color. Those who regard Dr. King as the political leader of a narrow cause or the spokesman for a single group fail to share the spiritual vision of the oneness of all. Injustice in any form affecting anyone was viewed by Dr. King as a threat to everyone.

Oppression against one group is oppression against us all. His efforts reflected a moral drive to improve the life of all human beings. By commemorating Martin Luther King's birthday, we do more than honor one man, however extraordinary: we honor the profound spirit of love and concern for humanity that give us life and inspires us all.

The significance of his life to us and to America may be found in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize: "Non-violence is the answer to the cultural, moral and political questions of our time – the need for man to overcome oppression and violence. I accept this award today for an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of all mankind." Dr. King was truly a great American.

So let us commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., today, and let our hearts beat to the rhythm of this march for life. But how, in fact, can our hearts beat to the rhythm of our march for life if our soul cannot sing out to the sound of love. How can we sing out love, if our lips do not embrace the taste of peace and harmony and unity? But how can our lips embrace these great feelings, if our hands do not

reach out and intermingle into a melting pot of one.

We ought to have a way to honor this human being and reaffirm the ideals he lived and died for; to honor him through a national holiday would also, of course, bestow a great honor on Black America by implicitly acknowledging him as a symbol of the tremendous contributions Black people have made to this country's historical development. It would also represent another step forward in officially and symbolically embracing the lives and dreams of all the people who compose the American nation. Designating his birthday a national holiday would create an event for all Americans, for Dr. King was a champion for justice and liberty. So when you return to your cities, your homes, your jobs please carry on the vigil. For this dream our dream, goes beyond politics, beyond oppression, beyond mere history, but not beyond hope or love, for this dream shall never die.