

Congressional Timeline Lesson Plan: Martin Luther King Holiday



SUBJECTS

American Government, Social Studies, U.S. History, Journalism



GRADE LEVEL

10-12



OBJECTIVES

This lesson will introduce students to reporting on the acrimonious Senate debate on a bill to declare the third Monday in January a legal public holiday honoring the slain civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



LESSON PLAN

Context:

Bills to honor the memory of King had been introduced repeatedly in Congress since his death in Memphis, Tennessee, by assassination on April 4, 1968. In July 1983, the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee reported HR 3345 to designate the third Monday in January as a federal holiday honoring King. The House passed HR 3706, an identical bill with 109 cosponsors, on August 2 by a 338-90 vote. That bill then moved to the Senate for consideration.

Senate opposition to the bill was led by Jesse Helms (R-NC) who did not believe that King was worthy of the honor and claimed, too, that the federal holiday was too costly to the economy. President Ronald Reagan also opposed the legislation initially. After two days of debate, the Senate passed HR 3706 on October 19, 78-22. With reluctance, President Reagan signed the bill on November 2.

This lesson focuses on the Senate debate as reported by Time magazine congressional correspondent [Neil MacNeil on October 20](#). **MacNeil's report took the form of a seven-page wire to senior editors in New York.** Link to the annotated report here http://www.congressionaltimeline.org/Documents/98th_11021983_King.pdf. Among the subjects MacNeil covered are these: **Senate Helms's strategy and argument; responses to Helms's opposition to the bill; Senate rules governing debate; efforts to amend the bill; the demographics of the final Senate vote; and reports on the potential cost of the measure.**

Lesson:

The instructor shall introduce the historical questions to be addressed by MacNeil's report on the Senate debate over the King holiday bill. Here are some possible questions: What were the principal objections to establishing the holiday? What procedures were invoked during the debate (e.g., the threat of cloture, efforts to send the bill to committee, offering of amendments)? In what ways did Senate rules influence the course of the debate?

1. **First, students will summarize the information by examining the text of MacNeil's report** to find information that is clearly stated there. They should consider these **questions: What type of document is MacNeil's report?** What specific information or perspectives does the report provide about the King holiday debate? Who were the people who participated in the debate and what positions did they take? What is the **source of MacNeil's reporting? What is the purpose of his story?** What do you know about MacNeil and Time magazine?

2. **Next, students will place MacNeil's report in context. This phase will require them to consult sources beyond the document.** Among the questions to answer are these: When and where was the report produced? Why did MacNeil write the story? Why did the issue come to the Senate at this time? What was the partisan composition of the Senate?

3. Inferring provides students with the chance to revisit initial facts gleaned from the source and expand their understanding of the information. Possible questions include **the following: What interpretations may be drawn about Senator Jesse Helm's opposition to the bill and Ted Kennedy's support of it? What points of view did other participants bring to the Senate debate? What evidence indicates whether or not Senator Helms accomplished his objective? What does the break down of the final vote indicate about southern Democrats or the Republican party? What missing information could MacNeil have included in his report?**

4. Students should reflect upon the historical question(s) posed by the instructor and **reconsider their assumptions about how MacNeil's report addresses the question(s): What additional evidence beyond MacNeil's report is necessary to answer the historical question? What ideas or terms need further defining? How useful is MacNeil's report in answering the historical question?**

5. To extend the lesson, students should examine other sources that describe the efforts to establish a national holiday to honor Dr. King. For example, students could read **President Reagan's public statement upon signing the legislation. Questions: What similarities and differences exist between President Reagan's statement and The Senate debate? What conclusions may be drawn from them? What additional information or sources are necessary to answer more fully the guiding historical question?**



RESOURCES

Neil MacNeil's report, October 20, 1983:

http://www.congressionaltimeline.org/Documents/98th_11021983_King.pdf

President Ronald Reagan's statement upon signing the bill on November 2:

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=40708&st=&st1=>



CREDIT

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