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The Odd Couple: [Op-Ed]

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On Oct. 27, 1964, Ronald Reagan came to national political prominence. In a televised speech he endorsed the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater, the Republican senator from Arizona.

Mr. Goldwater was considered a foe of the civil rights movement. In fact, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was moved to publicly oppose his candidacy. As a result of the Goldwater endorsement, Mr. Reagan, who two years earlier had been a registered Democrat, was soon seen by many as being on the opposite side of everything the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was fighting for at the time. Yet two decades later, in November 1983, President Reagan signed a bill establishing a national holiday in honor of Dr. King.

How do we understand this twist of history? After all, there was little hint of the convergence of the two men's views -- even a month before Mr. Reagan signed the holiday into law. Responding to questions at a press conference on Oct. 19, 1983, the president refused to dispute the notion that Dr. King might have been a Communist sympathizer. And while he said he would sign legislation authorizing a King holiday, he made clear that he "would have preferred a day similar to, say, Lincoln's birthday, which is not technically a national holiday." His remarks stirred considerable controversy, and the president called Coretta Scott King to offer his apologies a few days later.

Some have wondered whether Mr. Reagan's subsequent, enthusiastic support of the King bill was simply an astute political move. The start of a presidential election year lay just two months ahead and he was seeking re-election. But the president and his advisers surely knew that signing the King bill would not deliver the black vote to the Republicans. Furthermore, whatever his failings, Ronald Reagan was not a political panderer; to critics and supporters alike, he was perceived as being rooted in his beliefs.

Something else was at work. And it goes to the heart of why the King holiday has evolved into a powerful and positive American symbol. Party affiliation and politics -- and, surely, background and race -- separated the president from Dr. King. "Finding material for the remarks was easy," says Peter Robinson, the White House speechwriter who drafted the speech that the president delivered when he signed the King holiday into law. "The dignity of the individual, the equality of all men before God, the promise that America could set an example for the world -- I kept finding passage after passage in King's work that Reagan might almost have written himself."

Indeed, when one looks closely at each man's writings, it's clear that they shared an unswerving commitment to democracy, liberty and equality. Having spent years studying and archiving the former president's letters and speeches, I have concluded that he overcame his reservations about the King bill by tapping into his personal experiences -- and coming away with an understanding of the ways in which racism and bigotry violate the basic American values he and Dr. King worked to make real.

In his private writings, Ronald Reagan has always maintained that his earliest encounters and views on race were shaped by his parents' quiet activism. Mr. Reagan has told the story of how, one bitterly cold night, his father slept in his car to protest a hotel's policy of not admitting Jews. The president's father also refused to allow his sons to see the movie "Birth of a Nation," on the ground that it glorified the Ku Klux Klan.

Mr. Reagan has said that his first personal experience with racism against blacks occurred while he was on the football team at Eureka College. He and his teammates were traveling by bus in Illinois near his hometown, and stopped at a hotel for lodging. When the hotel manager refused to accommodate his black teammates, Mr. Reagan offered to take them to his home for the night. His parents warmly welcomed their son's friends.

On another occasion, Ronald Reagan saw Franklin Burghardt, one of his black teammates, physically attacked during a game by a player from the opposing team. Mr. Burghardt earned Ronald Reagan's admiration by responding to the attack with firm but fair play.

As a public figure, Mr. Reagan rarely discussed his views on racism, a fact that surely fueled the perception that he was uninterested in America's race problem. Still, there are moments when he has given us a window into his thinking. In his 1990 memoir, "An American Life," Mr. Reagan contends that as governor of California he put more blacks in executive-level positions in state government than all previous governors combined. In the book, he also tells the story of a meeting with black leaders in San Francisco during those years. When asked by his audience why he hadn't spoken more about his appointments, he responded that it would be "cheap politics" to capitalize on placing qualified people in senior management positions. "With that, the whole atmosphere of the meeting changed," he writes. The black leaders "thought I had been quiet about it because I was fearful of angering my more conservative white supporters."

Perhaps it was President Reagan's final statement about Dr. King at his October 1983 press conference that best helps explain why he signed the bill. "I believe the symbolism of that day," the president said. In the president's mind, the values Dr. King championed trumped political differences.

Dr. King invoked God-given and constitutional rights in defense of extending civil rights to every man. He believed in his country's distinct ability to maintain a steadfast commitment to its values even when institutional realities pointed in other directions. Dr. King personified the American creed. That it was Ronald Reagan who bestowed on Dr. King the honor of a national holiday should no longer come as a surprise.

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