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Put Martin Luther King Jr. on the Twenty-Dollar Bill

By Michael Shellenberger and Tommy McDonald

Republicans in Congress recently made headlines when they proposed replacing President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the dime with Ronald Reagan. Putting a living former president on a coin would constitute a serious break with tradition, and the proposal soon lost momentum after Nancy Reagan made her opposition known.

We agree with the Republicans that it's time for a change in who is represented on our currency. But instead of Reagan, whose vision for America continues to divide the country, we propose an American whose tragic early death brought us together: Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr. was more than a great African American civil rights leader. He was one of the greatest moral leaders of the twentieth century. To this day King symbolizes the triumph of love, nonviolence, and community values over hatred, violence and material values.

We created a national holiday for him (signed into law by Reagan in 1983). We named schools and streets after him. We consider his "I Have a Dream" speech to be a masterpiece of political oratory. Who would argue that the Nobel Peace Prize winning King doesn't deserve to be on our money?

It took many years for King's birthday to become a holiday so there's no question that our proposal will encounter political resistance. But our currency is not reserved for former presidents; Ben Franklin, after all, is on the one hundred dollar bill. Nor is our money only the domain of white men: Sacagawea, Lewis and Clark's Indian scout, is on the dollar coin.

In our view, King deserves to grace a commonly used bill, not an oddly shaped and obscure dollar coin like the Susan B. Anthony or the Sacagawea. We propose instead to replace President Andrew Jackson with Martin Luther King Jr. on the \$20. Such a change would elevate a great moral leader while making a small step toward repairing America's relationship with African Americans and Native Americans.

Jackson earned his fame and fortune as a slave trader and Indian hunter. His presidential legacy is marked by the barbaric Indian Removal Act which evicted at least 47,000 Creek, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Cherokee and Seminole Indians from their homes so their land could be turned into cotton-growing slave plantations. The Indian Removal Act led directly to the infamous Trail of Tears, where four thousand Cherokee men, women and children died in a forced march west.

There was nothing inevitable about Jackson and what he did. He had to overcome stiff opposition to his anti-Indian and pro-slavery policies from the public and the media. After it narrowly passed Congress, the Supreme Court declared the Indian Removal Act unconstitutional. But just as soon as Chief Justice John Marshall handed down his

decision Jackson disobeyed it, thereby violating the constitution and threatening the very foundation of our government. Jackson is reported to have said, "John Marshall has made his decision. Now let him enforce it."

During the Trail of Tears, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an open letter to Jackson's Vice President and successor, President Martin Van Buren, calling the Indian evictions "...a crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokees of a country, for how could we call the conspiracy that should crush these poor Indians our government, or the land that was cursed by their parting and dying imprecations our country any more?"

It's unlikely that opponents of putting King on the \$20 will want to compare Jackson's moral fiber to King's. But if love for Andrew Jackson is stronger than we imagine, we would be willing to make the following political compromise: that the former president's portrait be moved to the tail side of the Sacagawea one-dollar coin.

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