
The Opinion Pages

When Martin Luther King Came Out Against Vietnam

DAVID J. GARROW | VIETNAM '67 | APRIL 4, 2017

Fifty years ago today — and one year to the day before his assassination — the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the most politically charged speech of his life at Riverside Church in Upper Manhattan. It was a blistering attack on the government’s conduct of the Vietnam War that, among other things, compared American tactics to those of the Nazis during World War II.

The speech drew widespread condemnation from across the political spectrum, including from this newspaper. Other civil rights leaders, who supported the war and sought to retain President Lyndon B. Johnson as a political ally, distanced themselves from Dr. King.

Dr. King’s Riverside Church address exemplified how, throughout his final 18 months of life, he repeatedly rejected the sunny optimism of his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech and instead mourned how that dream had “turned into a nightmare.” But the speech also highlighted how for Dr. King, civil rights was never a discrete problem in American society, and that racism went hand in hand with the fellow

evils of poverty and militarism that kept the country from living up to its ideals. Beyond signaling his growing radicalism, the Riverside speech reflected Dr. King's increasing political courage — and shows why, half a century later, he remains a pivotal figure in American history.

As early as the first months of 1965, even before Johnson had begun his troop buildup in Vietnam, Dr. King was calling for a negotiated settlement to the conflict, telling journalists, "I'm much more than a civil-rights leader." But his criticism of the government's refusal to halt widespread aerial bombing and pursue peace talks attracted little public comment until that fall, when Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut, a close ally of Johnson, attacked Dr. King and cited an obscure 1799 criminal statute, the Logan Act, that prohibited private citizens from interacting with foreign governments.

Dr. King was privately distraught over the war and Dodd's response. The F.B.I.'s wiretapping of his closest advisers overheard him telling them "how immoral this is. I think someone should outline how wrong we are." But he reluctantly agreed that he should "withdraw temporarily" from denouncing the war. "Sometimes the public is not ready to digest the truth," he said.

Dr. King remained relatively mute about the war through most of 1966, but by year's end he was expressing private disgust at how increased military spending had torn a gaping budget hole in Johnson's Great Society domestic programs. "Everything we're talking about really boils down to the fact that we have this war on our hands," Dr. King said in yet another wiretapped phone call.

Finally, in early 1967, he had had enough. One day Dr. King pushed aside a plate of food while paging through a magazine whose photographs depicted the burn wounds suffered by Vietnamese children who had been struck by napalm. The images were unforgettable, he said. "I came to the conclusion that I could no longer remain silent about an issue that was destroying the soul of our nation."

Even at the time, antiwar opposition remained politically marginal, and Dr. King's advisers were upset over his desire to participate in a forthcoming mid-April New York protest. In late February, Dr. King joined four antiwar senators —

including a Republican, Mark Hatfield of Oregon — at a Los Angeles forum, and a month later he participated in an antiwar march in Chicago.

Both events received modest press coverage, and in their wake Dr. King told Stanley Levison, long his closest adviser: “I can no longer be cautious about this matter. I feel so deep in my heart that we are so wrong in this country and the time has come for a real prophecy and I’m willing to go that road.”

Levison and others arranged for a respectable antiwar group, Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, to schedule an appearance at Riverside Church, a bastion of establishment liberalism. For Dr. King, the speech couldn’t come soon enough. Three days prior he told a reporter, “We are merely marking time in the civil rights movement if we do not take a stand against the war.”

At Riverside, Dr. King told the 3,000-person overflow crowd that “my conscience leaves me no other choice” than to “break the betrayal of my own silences” over the past two years. Following the widespread urban riots that had marked the summer of 1966, “I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today — my own government.”

Dr. King acknowledged how his sense of prophetic obligation had been strengthened by his receipt of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, which represented “a commission to work harder than I had ever worked before for ‘the brotherhood of man’ ” — a calling “that takes me beyond national allegiances.” Dr. King emphasized that he counted himself among those who are “bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism.”

Dr. King then turned his full wrath against the war. He insisted that “we have no honorable intentions in Vietnam” and that “we have been wrong from the beginning of our adventure in Vietnam.” He alleged that the United States tested its latest weapons on Vietnamese peasants “just as the Germans tested out new medicines and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe,” and he decried “the concentration camps we call fortified hamlets” in South Vietnam.

He recommended that all young men confronting the military draft declare themselves conscientious objectors, and he called for the United States to halt all bombing and announce a unilateral cease-fire while preparing to “make what reparations we can for the damage we have done.”

But the war wasn't just a mistake; it was “a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit.” Civil rights, inequality and American policy in Southeast Asia were all of a larger piece. When “profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.” He concluded by calling for “a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation.”

The Riverside crowd gave Dr. King a standing ovation, but editorial denunciations were swift and harsh. The Washington Post criticized his “sheer inventions of unsupported fantasy” and lamented how “many who have listened to him with respect will never again accord him the same confidence.”

The New York Times called Dr. King's remarks both “facile” and “slander.” It said the moral issues in Vietnam “are less clear-cut than he suggests” and warned that “to divert the energies of the civil rights movement to the Vietnam issue is both wasteful and self-defeating,” given how the movement needed to confront what the paper called “the intractability of slum mores and habits.”

Even some of the black press lined up against him: The Pittsburgh Courier warned that Dr. King was “tragically misleading” African-Americans on issues that were “too complex for simple debate.”

Dr. King was unmoved. He told Levison that “I was politically unwise but morally wise. I think I have a role to play which may be unpopular,” for “I really feel that someone of influence has to say that the United States is wrong, and everybody is afraid to say it.”

Dr. King was indeed ahead of his time, but not for long. A year later, antiwar sentiment pushed Johnson out of his re-election bid, and today we remember opposition to the war as a widespread phenomenon, so much so that Dr. King's

Riverside Church speech is often overlooked as just one more statement against an unpopular conflict.

But it would be a mistake to read Dr. King's speech as merely an antiwar statement. It reflected his widening worldview that chronic domestic poverty and military adventurism overseas infected the wealthiest nation on earth just as indelibly as did deep-rooted racism. It went to the heart of the multilayered social and political conflicts of the 1960s — and, like all great rhetoric, continues to speak to us today.

Correction: April 4, 2017

An earlier version of the photo caption misstated the placement of Dr. Benjamin Spock; he is on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s right, not his left. The caption also misstated the time of the demonstration; it was April 1967, not March 1967.

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