

Martin Luther King: The U.S. is “The Greatest Purveyor of Violence in the World Today”

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The U.S. is “The Greatest Purveyor of Violence in the World Today”. That statement by MLK more than ever prevails today.

On November 9th, 1967, Dr. King gave the Annual Convocation address of the Graduate Student Association (GSA) at SUNY Buffalo. on behalf of the GSA, I was co-organizer of the event and his driver that evening. This speech was seven months after his historic “Beyond Vietnam” oration at New York’s Riverside Church in which he condemned that war. That evening, we discussed the harsh attacks he received for his opposition. King calmly and patiently explained that he opposed the Vietnam conflict because conscience demanded it; he resolutely stayed the course until his assassination five months later.

“BEYOND VIETNAM” is perhaps his greatest speech, although unknown to most Americans compared with his “I Have a Dream” oration at the August 1963 March for Freedom and Jobs in Washington. Those who have heard or watched King’s magnificent oration that day are deeply moved, but to this day little is known about the pre-march “apprehension [and] dread” of the corporate media and political establishment. President Kennedy ordered 4,000 troops to be “assembled in the suburbs, backed by 15,000 paratroopers” of the 82nd Airborne Division in North Carolina; his aide was ready “to cut the power to the public-address system if rally speeches proved incendiary”; Washington banned all alcohol sales for the first time since Prohibition; and hospitals prepared “for riot casualties.”

The event was a huge success: it drew a record crowd of some 250,000 people in a marvelous and peaceful show of support for justice (Taylor Branch, “Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1954-63”). Four years later, King articulated powerful truths about the War in Vietnam and this nation. He laid his firm opposition to the war squarely on the shoulders of the U.S. government – that had denied the Vietnamese their right to independence, aided brutal French colonialism there, created and supported Diem’s dictatorship in South Vietnam, and violated the 1954 Geneva Agreement.

King denounced the U.S. as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today,” and saw the war was “a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit.” Later that spring, he asserted that “the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together”: we could not “get rid of one without getting rid of the others [and] the whole structure of American life must be changed.” He stated that the injustice of the conflict was inextricably linked to the African American struggle for civil rights. The war was an enemy of poor people because it diverted money that could be used to mitigate the effects of poverty. And the poor, especially the African American poor, were being killed or maimed in higher

proportions than their representation in the U.S. population (Southern Christian Leadership Conference Report, 1967). King's speech elicited vicious attacks by the political and corporate media establishment, and civil rights leaders. Life Magazine stated, "Much of his speech was a demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi."

The New York Times called his effort to link civil rights and opposition to the war a "disservice to both. The moral issues in Vietnam are less clear-cut than he suggests." It concluded that there were "no simple or easy answers to the war in Vietnam or to racial injustice in this country." The Washington Post claimed that some of his assertions were "sheer inventions of unsupported fantasy"; that King had "diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country and to his people." The corporate media and political condemnation of King accurately reflected public sentiment; a Harris poll taken in May 1967 revealed that 73 percent of Americans opposed his antiwar position, including 50 percent of African Americans.

If we wish to pay tribute to Dr. King, we should read (or reread) his "Beyond Vietnam" speech, and abandon the myths about him and the movement for justice and peace to which he dedicated his life. We do a grave injustice to his legacy and that struggle by revising the actual history of the era, and by failing to fully understand and confront the economic exploitation, militarism, and racism that he condemned – which continue to poison this nation.

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