

# The True Meaning of War and Peace. Barack Obama versus Martin Luther King

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

That sounds like a crazy question, doesn't it? Why would President Obama denounce Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Well, the reason I ask is that he's done it before.

Really? But surely he wouldn't do it on such a solemn occasion?

Well, the time he did it before was in a Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech.

When President Barack Obama joined the ranks of Henry Kissinger and the other gentle souls who have received Nobel Peace Prizes, he did something that I don't think anyone else had previously done in a Peace Prize acceptance speech. He argued for war. And he opposed the position of a previous Peace Prize Laureate, namely Martin Luther King, Jr.:

"There will be times when nations — acting individually or in concert — will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified. I make this statement mindful of what Martin Luther King Jr. said in this same ceremony years ago: 'Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones.'...But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by [King's and Gandhi's] examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism — it is a recognition of history.... So yes, the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace."

But, you know, I've never found any opponent of war who didn't believe there was evil in the world. After all, we oppose war because it is evil.

Did Martin Luther King, Jr., not face the world as it is? Was he delusional? Did he stand idle in the face of threats? This is President Obama's position.

Did King oppose protecting and defending people? Of course not. He worked for that very goal!

Obama claims that his only choices are war or nothing. But the reason people know the names Gandhi (who was never given a Nobel Peace Prize) and King is that they suggested

other options and proved that those other approaches could work. This fundamental disagreement cannot be smoothed over. Either war is the only option or it is not — in which case we must consider the alternatives.

Couldn't we have halted Hitler's armies without a world war? To claim otherwise is ridiculous. We could have halted Hitler's armies by not concluding World War I with an effort seemingly aimed at breeding as much resentment as possible in Germany (punishing a whole people rather than individuals, requiring that Germany admit sole responsibility, taking away its territory, and demanding enormous reparations payments that it would have taken [in fact did take] Germany several decades to pay), or by putting our energies seriously into a League of Nations and International Court as opposed to the victor-justice of dividing the spoils, or by building good relations with Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, or by funding peace studies in Germany rather than eugenics, or by fearing militaristic governments more than leftist ones, or by not funding Hitler and his armies, or by helping the Jews escape, or by maintaining a ban on bombing civilians, or indeed by massive nonviolent resistance which requires greater courage and valor than we've ever seen in war.

We have seen such courage in the largely nonviolent eviction of the British rulers from India, in the nonviolent overthrow of the ruler of El Salvador in 1944, in the campaigns that ended Jim Crow in the United States and apartheid in South Africa. We've seen it in the popular removal of the ruler of the Philippines in 1986, in the largely nonviolent Iranian Revolution of 1979, in the dismantling of the Soviet Union in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany, as well as in the Ukraine in 2004 and 2005, and in dozens of other examples from all over the world, including Tunisia and Egypt. Why should Germany be the one place where a force more powerful than violence could not possibly have prevailed?

If you can't accept that World War II could have been avoided, there is still this crucial point to consider: Hitler's armies have been gone for 65 years but are still being used to justify the scourge of humanity that we outlawed in 1928: *war*. Most nations do not behave as Nazi Germany did, and one reason is that a lot of them have come to value and understand peace. Those that do make war still appeal to a horrible episode in world history that ended 65 years ago to justify what they are doing — exactly as if nothing has changed, exactly as if King and Gandhi and billions of other people have not come and gone and contributed their bit to our knowledge of what can and should be done.

Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda to lay down its arms? How would President Obama know that? The United States has never tried it. The solution cannot be to meet the demands of terrorists, thereby encouraging terrorism, but the grievances against the United States that attract people to anti-U.S. terrorism seem extremely reasonable:

Get out of our country. Stop bombing us. Stop threatening us. Stop blockading us. Stop raiding our homes. Stop funding the theft of our lands. Stop taking out natural resources. Such grievances are being aggravated rather than alleviated in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, and elsewhere.

We ought to satisfy those demands even in the absence of negotiations with anyone. We ought to stop producing and selling most of the weapons we want other people to "lay down." And if we did so, you would see about as much anti-U.S. terrorism as the Norwegians giving out the prizes see anti-Norwegian terrorism. Norway has neither negotiated with al

Qaeda nor murdered all of its members. Norway has just refrained from doing what the United States military does, although sometimes participating.

Martin Luther King, Jr., and Barack Obama disagree, and only one of them can be right. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, King said:

“Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. Negroes of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.”

Love? I thought it was a big stick, a large Navy, a missile defense shield, and weapons in outerspace. King may in fact have been ahead of us. This portion of King’s 1964 speech anticipated Obama’s speech 45 years later:

“I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality....I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up.”

Other-centered? How odd it sounds to imagine the United States and its people becoming other-centered. It sounds as outrageous as loving one’s enemies. And yet there may just be something to it. King was a moral man who, if alive today, would be an environmentalist. He might very well be risking arrest at the White House right now to demand clean energy rather than the opening up of enough new dirty fuel use to finish off the planet. He would likely be committed to nonviolent actions of the sort planned for October 2011 at <http://october2011.org>

A year ago, on October 2, 2010, a broad coalition held a rally at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. The organizers sought to use the rally both to demand jobs, protect Social Security, and advance a hodgepodge of progressive ideas, and also to cheer for the Democratic Party, whose leadership was not on board with that program. An independent movement would back particular politicians, including Democrats, but they would have to earn it by supporting our positions.

The peace movement was included in the rally, if not given top billing, and many peace organizations took part. We found that, among all of those tens of thousands of union members and civil rights activists who showed up, virtually all of them were eager to carry anti-war posters and stickers. In fact the message “Money for Jobs, Not Wars,” was immensely popular. If anyone at all disagreed, I haven’t heard about it. The theme of the rally was “One Nation Working Together,” a warm message but one so vague we didn’t even offend anyone enough to produce a counter-rally. I suspect more people would have shown up and a stronger message would have been delivered had the headline been “Bring Our War Dollars Home!”

One speech outshone all others that day. The speaker was 83-year-old singer and activist Harry Belafonte, his voice strained, scratchy, and gripping. These were some of his words:

“Martin Luther King, Jr., in his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech 47 years ago, said that America would soon come to realize that the war that we were in at that time that this nation waged in Vietnam was not only unconscionable, but unwinnable. Fifty-eight thousand Americans died in that cruel adventure, and over two million Vietnamese and Cambodians perished. Now today, almost a half-a-century later, as we gather at this place where Dr. King prayed for the soul of this great nation, tens of thousands of citizens from all walks of life have come here today to rekindle his dream and once again hope that all America will soon come to the realization that the wars that we wage today in far away lands are immoral, unconscionable and unwinnable.

“The Central Intelligence Agency, in its official report, tells us that the enemy we pursue in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, the al- Qaeda, they number less than 50 — I say 50 — people. Do we really think that sending 100,000 young American men and women to kill innocent civilians, women, and children, and antagonizing the tens of millions of people in the whole region somehow makes us secure?

“Does this make any sense?

“The President’s decision to escalate the war in that region alone costs the nation \$33 billion. That sum of money could not only create 600,000 jobs here in America, but would even leave us a few billion to start rebuilding our schools, our roads, our hospitals and affordable housing. It could also help to rebuild the lives of the thousands of our returning wounded veterans.”

In November 1943, six residents of Coventry, England, which had been bombed by Germany, wrote to the New Statesman to condemn the bombing of German cities, asserting that the “general feeling” in Coventry was the “desire that no other people shall suffer as they have done.”

In 1997, on the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Guernica, the president of Germany wrote a letter to the Basque people apologizing for the Nazi-era bombing. The Mayor of Guernica wrote back and accepted the apology.

Murder Victims’ Families for Human Rights is an international organization, based in the United States, of family members of victims of criminal murder, state execution, extra-judicial assassinations, and “disappearances” who oppose the death penalty in all cases.

Peaceful Tomorrows is an organization founded by family members of those killed on September 11, 2001, who say they have, “united to turn our grief into action for peace. By developing and advocating nonviolent options and actions in the pursuit of justice, we hope to break the cycles of violence engendered by war and terrorism. Acknowledging our common experience with all people affected by violence throughout the world, we work to create a safer and more peaceful world for everyone.”

So must we all.

A memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr., should be a celebration of nonviolent resistance to habits of thought that allow and promote cruelty, including the worst cruelty of all: war. Candidate Obama said “I want to end the mindset that got us into war in the first place.”

One way to help end that mindset would be to cease defending it in the most inappropriate manner imaginable.

David Swanson is author of "War Is A Lie," <http://warisalie.org> from which this is excerpted and modified.

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David Swanson is the author of "War Is A Lie"

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