

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Beyond Vietnam"

On April 4, 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr., made his most public and comprehensive statement against the Vietnam War. Addressing a crowd of 3,000 people in Riverside Church in New York City, King delivered a speech entitled "Beyond Vietnam." He pointed out that the war effort was "taking the young black men who have been crippled by our society and sending them 13,000 miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem." Although some activists and newspapers supported King's statement, most responded with criticism. King's civil rights colleagues began to disassociate themselves from his radical stance, as the NAACP issued a statement against merging the civil rights movement and peace movement. King remained undeterred, stating that he was not fusing the civil rights and peace movements, as many had suggested. Two weeks after delivering his speech, King led thousands of demonstrators on an antiwar march to the United Nations.

Overview

The goal of this unit is to have students analyze, within the context of a particular historical period, Dr. King's decision to speak out against the war in Vietnam. Why did he make this choice? What risks were involved? How was his speech received? Ultimately, this unit asks students to connect this speech to the present by having them consider which of Dr. King's ideas about America's role in the world are relevant to us today. In addition to encouraging active learning and the development of critical thinking skills, this lesson will help students see King as

more than a civil rights leader as they explore the political and social implications of King's position against the war and his call for economic justice.

In addition to King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech, this lesson includes a number of primary source documents that will help

students respond thoughtfully to the questions raised above. Without the appropriate historical context, however, students may have difficulty making sense of the complex issues that connect the war and domestic policy. Therefore, it is essential that students have a basic understanding of the history of the war in Vietnam and the public debate that was taking place in the U.S. at that time. This unit also supports students as they grapple with the ideas and questions raised in the documents themselves.

King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech includes a great deal of information, and we encourage teachers to break the document into at least two parts to make the material more manageable. The speech can be accessed in its entirety on the King Papers Project's web site at <http://www.kingpapers.org>. For this particular unit, we have chosen to use a newspaper editorial, two letters to the editor, and letters written to and by King to help students

explore both sides of the issue as well as give them a broader historical context. For some useful information on teaching with primary sources, see Joan Musbach's "Using Primary Sources in the Secondary Classroom," *OAH Magazine of History* 16 (Fall 2001), 30-32.



Martin Luther King, Jr., (lower right) is flanked by policeman as Harvard University students carry signs condemning his opposition to the Vietnam War, a position which he made public about three weeks earlier. April 23, 1967. (Image donated by Corbis-Bettman.)

National Standards

While most of us are accustomed to learning and teaching about King in the context of the civil rights movement, this lesson quite purposefully positions King in a different historical realm. Although King's role as a civil rights leader is still very relevant, we believe teaching about King in the context of the Vietnam War can help students deepen their knowledge of both King and the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. This lesson plan will fulfill the following standards in the *National Standards for United States History*:

Era 9: Postwar United States (1945-1970)

Standard 3C: Demonstrate understanding of the foreign and domestic consequences of U.S. involvement in Vietnam by:

- Assessing . . . the shifts of public opinion about the war.
- Evaluating how Vietnamese and Americans experienced the war and how the war continued to affect postwar politics and culture.
- Analyzing the constitutional issues involved in the war and exploring the war's legacy.

Standard 3 of the Standards in Historical Thinking: Historical Analysis and Interpretation.

Time

This unit is designed for three to five class periods, depending on whether students read the materials and write their reflective journal entries in or out of class.

Objectives

- To use primary sources to analyze the reasons Dr. King spoke out against the war in Vietnam and how this action was received.
- To place King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech into historical, social, and political context.
- To improve analytical and critical thinking skills.
- To develop strong arguments based on primary source materials.
- To broaden students' perception of King beyond that of a civil rights leader.

Preparation and Resources

The questions that guided the development of this lesson are: Why did King choose to speak out against the war in Vietnam? What can this decision teach us about King? What can the response to this speech teach us about the social and political climate during this period? And finally, how are King's words applicable today? In addition to King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech, students will work with documents that reflect both the support and criticism that followed King's speech.

This lesson utilizes a number of materials that can be found on the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project web site at <<http://www.kingpapers.org>>, including primary documents, the King Encyclopedia and a King chronology. The web site can be used by teachers in preparation for the lesson and may also be used by students to supplement an activity. Teachers may also join the Liberation Community, which provides access to a searchable database of documents, a discussion group, and printable King-related documents. We also suggest reading Chapter 30 of *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1998), edited by Clayborne Carson. This chapter provides

detailed background regarding King's decision to speak out against U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Procedure

Part 1: Establishing the Historical Context for "Beyond Vietnam"

- For this "anticipatory set" give students two minutes to write down names and references that come to mind when they think of the Vietnam War. Next, have them do the same thing for Martin Luther King, Jr. Have students break into pairs and share their answers. Ask students if any of them included Dr. King in their Vietnam list or if anyone referred to Vietnam when writing about Dr. King. In addition to establishing the historical context for the lesson, this activity will highlight the fact that Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Vietnam War are taught in isolation from one another, even though each had a profound impact on the other.
- Introduce King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech by showing the first ten minutes of episode 4, "The Promised Land," of the PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize II* (1992), if available. Follow with a discussion of the documentary.
- Have students read the first section of "Beyond Vietnam," available on the King Papers web site, or at least the excerpt reprinted in Clayborne Carson's article "King's Path to Antiwar Dissent" in this magazine, pages 27-28.

Part 2: Why did King speak out and how was his speech received?

- Have students form two groups: one that supports King's decision to speak out against the war and one that feels he made a error. Give each group a packet that you have assembled beforehand, consisting of documents reprinted at the end of this lesson: the *New York Times* editorial "Dr. King's Error," two letters to the editor of the *Times*, a letter written to King, and a three-page letter authored by King. You might supplement these documents with historical materials from local papers, if available. Instruct each group to use the documents that support *and* refute their position to develop as strong an argument as possible. You may have students write an editorial to present to the class or have a less formal presentation where students field questions from the opposing group.

Some questions to consider for the activity are:

1. Was King's decision to speak out against the war a departure from his stated philosophical, political, and/or social commitments?
2. What relevance does his role as a clergyman have for King's position? What about as a Nobel Peace Prize recipient? What about his role as a civil rights leader?
3. Do you believe there was a relationship between the war in Vietnam and the civil rights struggle at home? Why or why not?
4. Were there any inconsistencies with King's stated position on the war in Vietnam and his stated position as a civil rights leader? Consider the role of nonviolence.
5. What were some of the main criticisms King's opponents made regarding his statement on the war in Vietnam? What were some of the main arguments made by those defending King's position?
6. What if King had not taken a position on the war in Vietnam? Would it likely have undermined his stated commitment to nonviolence and social justice, or would it have merely highlighted his commitment to the civil rights movement?

7. What role, if any, might King's race have had to do with how his statement was received?

8. Do you believe that moral, religious, and political considerations should be separated if it serves a tactical goal?

9. In his letter to the editor of the New York Times, "Dr. King Backed," James Bevel states, "Logically, the welfare of non-white peoples in this nation is inextricably linked with the welfare of non-white peoples around the world." Do you agree? Why or why not?

10. What sort of impact do you believe King's decision to speak out against the war had on the civil rights movement? If you believe it harmed the movement, was it worth it?

11. Finally, how are these issues relevant today? How might this relate to our current situation in Iraq? Could the case be made that our current foreign policy has implications for domestic policy? How?

• Have students read the remainder of "Beyond Vietnam" and complete the primary source evaluation included at the end of this lesson plan. Have students share their responses with the class.

Part 3: What new information have we learned about Martin Luther King, Jr., and Vietnam?

• In small groups, have students look in their textbooks for an entry on King and Vietnam. If one exists, have them expand upon it based on what they have learned in this lesson. If one does not exist, have them write an original entry. Have students share answers with the class.

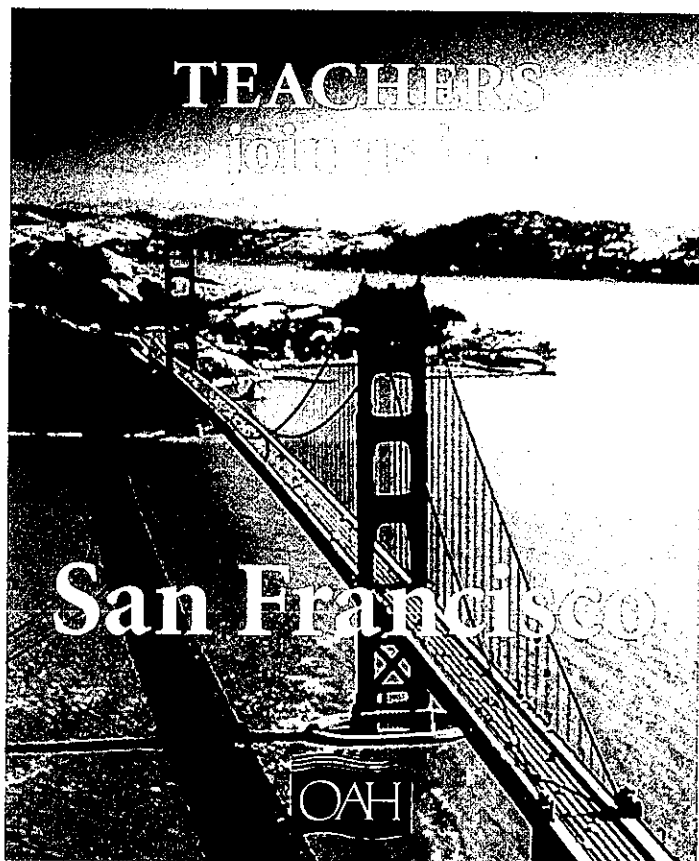
Part 4: Essay

• Using information gathered in parts 1-3 of this unit, students should write an essay that responds to King's call for a "revolution of values" and discuss how his words are relevant today. □

Bibliography

- Carson, Clayborne, ed. *Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Warner Books, 1998.
- Garrow, David. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.* New York: W. Morrow, 1986.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Address on Selma March, March 9, 1965."
- . "Why Are You Here?" Address delivered at the Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) orientation. June 15, 1965.
- . "Draft, Address delivered at Mass Rally at the Ninth Annual Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference." August 12, 1965. *Radical Times: The Antiwar Movement of the 1960s.* <<http://www.library.thinkquest.org/27942/index.htm>>.

Erin Cook is Associate Director of the Liberation Curriculum at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project at Stanford University and a teaching assistant for Professor Carson's course on the African American freedom struggle. Erin works with local history and English teachers on curriculum development, using the historical documents of the King Papers Project. Stan Pesick currently directs the Oakland Unified School District's Teaching American History grant. He taught U.S. History in Oakland for twenty years and has worked in the areas of curriculum and professional development for the past seven years. Stan and Erin have collaborated on curriculum for the past three years through the Urban Dreams grant.



Travel grants for teachers to attend the 2005 OAH Annual Meeting

Thanks to the generous support of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the Organization of American Historians is offering travel fellowships for precollegiate history teachers to attend the 2005 OAH Annual Meeting, March 31 – April 3. The annual meeting affords a unique opportunity for teachers to enhance their professional development by attending sessions specifically geared to classroom teaching, as well as scholarly research and public history. Fellowships are for travel-related expenses and preference will be given to teachers who are new to the annual meeting.

Application deadline for submission is February 10, 2005. Apply online at:
<<http://www.oah.org/meetings/2005/>>.

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Handout 1

Primary Source Evaluation

Title of primary source document: _____

Author: _____ Date: _____

1. Use one sentence to state the author's thesis.
2. What is the author's intent in creating this document? Provide examples from the document to support your answer.
3. What does this document tell us about the values and beliefs of the person or persons that produced it?
4. What does this document tell us about the social and political climate of the particular period when it was produced?
5. Briefly explain your response to this document. How do the issues addressed in this document relate to our current social/political environment?
6. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document.

Document 1

Dr. King's Error
New York Times (1967) Copyright © 1967, The New York Times Co.

Dr. King's Error

In recent speeches and statements the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has linked his personal opposition to the war in Vietnam with the cause of Negro equality in the United States. The war, he argues, should be stopped not only because it is a futile war waged for the wrong ends but also because it is a barrier to social progress in this country and therefore prevents Negroes from achieving their just place in American life.

This is a fusing of two public problems that are distinct and separate. By drawing them together, Dr. King has done a disservice to both. The moral issues in Vietnam are less clear-cut than he suggests; the political strategy of uniting the peace movement and the civil rights movement could very well be disastrous for both causes.

Because American Negroes are a minority and have to overcome unique handicaps of racial antipathy and prolonged deprivation, they have a hard time in gaining their objectives even when their grievances are self-evident and their claims are indisputably just. As Dr. King knows from the Montgomery bus boycott and other civil rights struggles of the past dozen years, it takes almost infinite patience, persistence and courage to achieve the relatively simple aims that ought to be theirs by right.

The movement toward racial equality is now in the more advanced and more difficult stage of fulfilling basic rights by finding more jobs, changing patterns of housing and upgrading education. The battlegrounds in this struggle are Chicago and Harlem and Watts. The Negroes on these fronts need all the leadership, dedication and moral inspiration that they can summon; and under these circumstances to divert the energies of the civil rights movement to the Vietnam issue is both wasteful and self-defeating.

Dr. King makes too facile a connection between the speeding up of the war in Vietnam and the slowing down of the war against poverty. The eradication of poverty is at best the task of a generation. This "war" inevitably meets diverse resistance such as the hostility of local political machines, the skepticism of conservatives in Congress and the intractability of slum mores and habits. The nation could afford to make more funds available to combat poverty even while the war in Vietnam continues, but there is no certainly that the coming of peace would automatically lead to a sharp increase in funds.

Furthermore, Dr. King can only antagonize opinion in this country instead of winning recruits to the peace movement by recklessly comparing American military methods to those of the Nazis testing "new medicine and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe." The facts are harsh, but they do not justify such slander. Furthermore, it is possible to disagree with many aspects of United States policy in Vietnam without whitewashing Hanoi.

As an individual, Dr. King has the right and even the moral obligation to explore the ethical implications of the war in Vietnam, but as one of the most respected leaders of the civil rights movement he has an equally weighty obligation to direct that movement's efforts in the most constructive and relevant way.

There are no simple or easy answers to the war in Vietnam or to racial injustice in this country. Linking these hard, complex problems will lead not to solutions but to deeper confusion.

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Transcription

"Dr. King's Error," *New York Times*, April 7, 1967, 36.

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Document 2

Transcriptions

"Letters to the Editor of *The Times*," *New York Times*, April 12, 1967, 46.

Dr. King Backed

To the Editor:

The New York Times has rendered a great disservice to the peace and civil rights movements in this country by making a futile attempt to dissociate the two.

In an April 7 editorial *The Times* severely criticized the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, for "fusing" the peace and civil rights issues into a single concern.

Logically, the welfare of non-white peoples in this nation is inextricably linked with the welfare of nonwhite peoples around the world. American Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Indians and Mexicans all have an exceedingly direct stake in the Administration's posture in Vietnam. They have experienced first hand the Government's disrespect for humanity and dignity at home and are compelled to voice their outrage at the calculated destruction abroad of their Vietnamese brothers.

The American Government seems, in fact, to be embarked upon a program of systematic genocide in Vietnam and it is for this reason, perhaps more than any other, that colored peoples everywhere must speak out and act courageously.

Those Americans opposing the war cannot any longer be guilty of silence while American nonwhites who have been deprived of their full citizenship are sent to their death in President Johnson's illegal, immoral and unjust war.

In order to dramatize the growing opposition to the war, thousands of Americans of all races, creeds, religions and national origins will gather together in San Francisco and in New York City on April 15 for Spring Mobilization protest march and rally.

Before the eyes of the world the Spring Mobilization will launch a sustained, serious movement which will begin to put an end to the senseless slaughter that is taking place in the name of democracy.

[Rev.] JAMES BEVELL
National Director
Spring Mobilization Committee
To End the War in Vietnam
New York, April 8, 1967

War Stand Rejected

To the Editor:

I consider that my support of the Urban League and membership in the N.A.A.C.P., to say nothing of my contributions to various liberal causes, entitle me to consider myself a white person of goodwill as that term was used by Dr. Martin Luther King in *The Times* of April 5.

Far from being willing personally to boycott the Vietnam war, however, or even to have my son claim status as a conscientious objector, I assert that it is necessary to support the war in Vietnam.

Dr. King's simplistic assertion that our Government is the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and his analogy between the use of new weapons by our forces in Vietnam and the use of strange medicines and torture by Hitler's murderers in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany raise grave doubts in my mind as to his ability to think clearly.

Dr. King and his ilk do not speak for me and mine.

JOSEPH LEWIS SIMON
New York, April 5, 1967

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3521 Ordway St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20016
April 2, 1967

Rev. Martin Luther King
332 Auburn Avenue, N.E.
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

PERSONAL

Dear Dr. King:

Your recent pronouncements which now go so far as to suggest the possibility of encouraging civil disobedience over Vietnam, cause me a great personal dilemma.

You will see enclosed my annual SCLC Sustaining Contributors Card. I never thought I would find myself in a position whereby it might seem morally indefensible to contribute to SCLC. But that, sir, is my awful problem.

I belong to a school of thought which I hope is large. To wit: I find it totally consistent to be willing to die, if necessary, for the cause of civil rights in the United States and, equally, to die, if necessary, to defend the rights of those to whom we have pledged our aid in Vietnam.

I do not mean to argue the issue. You undoubtedly know my position and I know yours. Vietnam is one of the most complex issues in our national history. I am a man who can respect your point of view and I do. And I know enough about you to know that you can at once respect and disagree with me. But if I see my contributions going increasingly to support a campaign against Vietnam, where am I left? That is not my purpose in supporting SCLC.

And yet, would it not be a vicious way to show my objection if I withdrew my support from SCLC? There is my dilemma. I expect that I will resolve it by continuing, as in the past, to give all I can to the negro scholarship fund, the legal defense fund, the ACLU, etc. But I deeply regret that I can no longer in good conscience help pay the overhead of the extremely important SCLC.

I have pondered this deeply. I know that the civil rights movement relates closely to Vietnam. I know the national treasure being expended on Vietnam detracts from the civil rights programs. I know that a deprived negro family in an overcrowded tenement finds scarce comfort in the thought that his welfare may be subordinated to the progress of a war on the other side of the world. And yet I feel so strongly that this is one of the many times in US history where domestic priorities must be temporarily re-arranged in order to secure the survival necessary to fight the domestic causes that I simply cannot support any agency which uses its power to oppose a foreign policy in which I deeply believe. I believe I am right and that is all there is to say. If we are not successful in our foreign policies, the grandchildren of the deprived tenement dwellers of today will not be members of tomorrow's American middle classes.

Respectfully yours,

Jay H. Cerf

334 Auburn Ave., N.E.
Atlanta, Georgia 30303
Telephone 522-1420

Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Martin Luther King Jr., *President*

Ralph Abernathy, *Treasurer*

Andrew J. Young, *Executive Director*

Thank you for your recent letter to me.

I am sorry that my recent speeches on Vietnam has cost us your support. However, I feel that war is no longer, if it ever was, a valid way to solve international problems. Even the negative good served by a war against an evil force such as Hitler can no longer be considered worth the costly risk to mankind, for the ultimate weapons of today mean only the destruction of mankind. Man can no longer afford war. We must find a non-violent way to settle the problems of the world.

It has been my consistent belief and position that non-violence is the only true solution to the social problems of the world and of this country. The principle of love which has motivated so many to strike out against the evils of racism here in America must motivate us to protest the brutal destruction of the Vietnamese People. It would be false for those of us who have protested against the continuation of American oppressiveness of its black minority, to not also protest against the attempted continuation of colonialism in Vietnam. For the Vietnamese have been struggling for 30 years against massive Japanese, French and American occupation forces.

2.

After participating in the defeat of Japanese militarism, the Vietnamese proclaimed their independence under the leadership of their war time commander against the Japanese - Ho Chi Minh. They likened their own course to that of the American patriots who fought in the Revolutionary War, quoting in their own historic documents from our own Declaration of Independence. They did not seek alliances with Moscow or Peking but petitioned to be made a member of the French Commonwealth. Their petition was refused. Their right to choose their own destiny was denied. They were thrown onto their own resources, and those of whoever might help them, while France waged a senseless and wasteful war of colonial suppression.

If North Vietnam is communist today, we have ourselves to blame. If they are alienated from America and American ideals we have ourselves to blame. For we rejected their appeal for friendship and understanding.

I do not intend to link the Civil Rights Movement organically to the Peace Movement. The Vietnam Summer Program and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference are in no way linked organizationally. I feel, however, that it is not possible for men of good will to segregate their principles for matters of expediency, tactics or any other reason. The presence of two evils requires us to speak out against the two evils.

I am not claiming for the Negro people special privileges to choose which war they wish to fight in, although this construction has unfortunately been placed on some of my remarks. I am, rather, stating general principles, which I believe that all men of good will can follow and adapt to their personal lives. However, I do feel that the Negro people, because of their peculiar experiences with oppression through the use of physical violence, have a particular responsibility to not participate in inflicting oppressive violence on another people. This is not a privilege but an exceptional moral responsibility, the weight of which is far from a happy burden.

I fear that much of America has failed to understand the full meaning of the non-violent method. Too many Americans support non-violence here within the United States of America for Negroes, but do not see in it, any such restrictions to the U.S. Government in its conduct of foreign policy. Such people who hold this contradictory position are not true believers in non-violence. So I say that it is wrong for anyone to praise me for my non-violent stand on Civil Rights and condemn me for being non-violent on Vietnam.

Finally, let me say that I have taken a stand against the war in Vietnam because my conscience leaves me with no other choice. I have been strongly influenced by the prophets of old and those who place the search for truth above expediency. I would like to hope that I am not a consensus leader, constantly determining what is right and wrong by taking a sort of Gallup poll of the majority opinion. Ultimately, a genuine leader is not a searcher of consensus, but a molder of consensus. On some positions, cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it right? There comes a time when one must take a stand that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because it is right. This is where I find myself today.

Sincerely yours,

Martin Luther King, Jr.