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Dr. King's Error
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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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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.

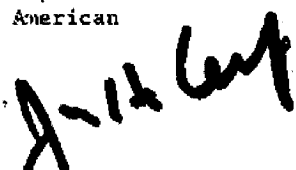
I do not mean to argue the issue. You undoubtedly know my position and I know yours. Vietnam is one of the most complex issues in our national history. I am a man who can respect your point of view and I do. And I know enough about you to know that you can at once respect and disagree with me. But if 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 pay 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.

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.