

A Revolution of Values

BY THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a speech in New York City on the occasion of his becoming Co-Chairman of Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (subsequently renamed Clergy and Laity Concerned.) Titled “Beyond Vietnam,” it was his first major speech on the war in Vietnam—what the Vietnamese aptly call the American War. In these excerpts, King links the escalating U.S. commitment to that war with its abandonment of the commitment to social justice at home. His call for a “shift from a ‘thing-oriented’ society to a ‘person-oriented’ society” and for us to “struggle for a new world” has acquired even greater urgency than when he issued it decades ago. — editors

Now, it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America’s soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read *Vietnam*. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over. So it is that those of us who are yet determined that “America will be” are led down the path of protest and dissent, working for the health of our land. ...

The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality we will find ourselves organizing Clergy and Laymen Concerned committees for the next generation. They will be



Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaks to a crowd of an estimated 400,000 people at the United Nations plaza after an anti-Vietnam War march, New York, New York, April 15, 1967.

concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa.

We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy. ...

In 1957 a sensitive American official overseas said that it seemed to him that our nation was on the wrong side of a world revolution. During the past 10 years we have seen emerge a pattern of suppression which now has justified the presence of U.S. military "advisors" in Venezuela. This need to maintain social stability for our investments accounts for the counter-revolutionary action of American forces in Guatemala. It tells why American helicopters are being used against guerrillas in Colombia and why American napalm and Green Beret forces have already been active against rebels in Peru. ...

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. ...

True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.

With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social

betterment of the countries, and say: "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America and say: "This is not just." The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just.

A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: "This way of settling differences is not just." This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. ...

These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression and out of the wombs of a frail world new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are rising up as never before. "The

people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." We in the West must support these revolutions. ...

Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores and thereby speed the day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain ..."

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter—but beautiful—struggle for a new world. ■

*We must rapidly
begin the shift from
a "thing-oriented"
society to a
"person-oriented"
society.*

A Revolution of Values

Teaching Ideas

1. Write the speech that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. might deliver today if he were alive. What would Dr. King have to say about the “war on terrorism” or the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan? Do you think Dr. King would support U.S. global policies today? What evidence from his 1967 speech supports your conclusion? What policies would he urge?
2. Dr. King talks about the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism. In what ways are these giant triplets at work in the world today? Ask students to make charts headed with these categories and to list all the ways they see these forces at work in our current circumstances. Ask them to choose one of the triplets and to design a poster illustrating it.
3. Write a dialogue between Dr. King and another individual: you, the president of the United States, a U.S. soldier in Iraq or Afghanistan, a high school student considering joining the military, or someone you learned about from studying the issues covered in this unit.