

## Rethinking MLK and Vietnam

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Throughout this week, educators across the globe will stray from their lesson plans to discuss the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Undoubtedly, many such discussions will focus on the landmark events of King's career, including the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. This latter moment will receive the most attention, as it was at the march that King gave his seminal "I Have a Dream" speech, a speech that encapsulates the most positive components of King's vision of racial equality. With nods to "the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence," King here spoke a language of Americanism that was both inclusive (there was a place in the movement for "our white brothers") and optimistic. "Now," King forcefully concluded, "is the time to make real the promises of democracy."

Current events will only make the decision to highlight such speeches as "I Have a Dream" even more alluring. This year, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day occurs almost exactly one year after the inauguration of Barack Obama, the nation's first African-American president. If the "architects of our republic" had indeed viewed America's founding documents as "a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir" – as King proclaimed in his 1963 speech – then perhaps one can read the election of Obama as the moment when the nation's African-American population finally had complete access to "the bank of justice." With such a development in mind, it seems as if the day when all Americans would live "in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" has finally arrived.

Obviously, there is much to this reading of King's life and words. King often spoke a language of democracy that transcended the confines of race, a language that Obama clearly drew upon throughout the 2008 campaign season. Sadly, King did not live to see the end result of his vision. In such a context, Obama's election victory served as a fitting conclusion to the long narrative of the modern civil rights movement, a victory that King would have joyfully welcomed. We, as a nation, had finally overcome.

Yet King was more than just one speech. And King, particularly towards the last years of his life, came to see the realities of racial inequality as just symptom of a larger disease that had afflicted America: the sickness of empire. It is this aspect of King's body of

work that I hope educators – as well as Obama himself – reflect upon this week. For King, as the Vietnam War raged on, violence abroad threatened to derail the real progress that the civil rights movement had made throughout the early to mid-1960s. Yet more importantly, King's evolution into an anti-war activist highlighted his ability to diagnosis the root cause of the country's sickness: its inability to view both the past and the present free from its ideological blinders. In places such as Vietnam, history and Cold War anti-communism had become so intertwined that an honest assessment of America's policies in the region had become impossible.

One begins to see evidence of King's burgeoning anti-war beliefs in such speeches as "Beyond Vietnam." In this speech, given April 4, 1967 before a crowd of 3,000 in New York's Riverside Church, King eloquently outlined his growing mistrust of American foreign policy. On one level, the country's escalation of attacks in Vietnam was making it harder and harder for King to convince younger, more militant civil rights demonstrators of the need to embrace non-violent confrontation. Such young people, when asked to confront the American state non-violently, answered back with one question: "what about Vietnam?" Violence, as the Vietnam War profoundly illustrated, had become the only language that U.S. policymakers seemed to understand.

At the same time, King realized that more money spent for the war effort meant less money for such domestic concerns as anti-poverty efforts. The Vietnam War was therefore "like some demonic suction tube," one that compelled King to "see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such." Yet the war was doing more than robbing America's poor by diverting resources from needy neighborhoods. It was also decimating another valuable resource: the very lives of African-American men. Convinced that the war "was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions to the rest of the population," King felt he had little choice but to speak out against such a destructive conflict.

Yet the most grievous error that American forces had made in Vietnam was misreading the region's history. The U.S. military had believed that the Vietnamese, following France's withdrawal from the country in 1954, would welcome an American presence in the region (one wonders if Dick Cheney heard this speech). To King, the Americans were undoubtedly viewed as "strange liberators." After all, the Vietnamese people had already proclaimed their independence in 1945 – using, as King pointed out, the American Declaration of Independence in their own "document of freedom." Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh had even written to President Harry S. Truman, proclaiming his admiration of American-style democracy and asking his administration to recognize the independence movement (Truman never wrote back). Instead, as King concluded, "we refused to recognize them.

At the core of this refusal was the belief that the "the Vietnamese people were not 'ready' for independence." Without our assistance and oversight, Vietnam would fall victim to the communist forces of the Soviet Union and China. Here, America "feel

victim to the deadly Western arrogance that has poisoned the international atmosphere for so long.” Unable to see beyond the binaries of the Cold War, America viewed Vietnamese development solely through the lens of anti-communism. Those that fought against us were then cast as inhuman agents of communism, their true motives for resisting American occupation left unexplored and unexamined. Instead, the U.S. focused exclusively on meeting such resistance through military means, paying little attention to the psychological and political repercussions of these destructive policies.

America, as President Obama has reminded us many times recently, is a country currently engaged in two wars. In many ways, we seem to have paid little attention to the warnings offered by King in 1967. The situations in both Iraq and Afghanistan are both marked by the inability to see beyond the ideological confines of the “War on Terror.” History has mattered little in these two conflicts, and – nine years after our initial campaign in Afghanistan – we still have very little understanding of the root causes of the animus against the United States. It is within this context that a reexamination of King’s entire body of work would prove useful at this historical moment.

All of this is not to simply argue that Afghanistan (or Iraq) will soon turn into Obama’s Vietnam. King’s thoughts on Vietnam remind us that a certain ahistorical hubris has informed U.S. foreign policy for much of the country’s existence – regardless of where these policies were ultimately enacted. We don’t need to cast Obama as a latter-day LBJ to make the case that we need to rethink our positions in Iraq and Afghanistan. We might, however, want to revisit King’s thoughts on such matters as we begin this difficult process.

- See more at: <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/122286#sthash.yF8AHJEz.dpuf>

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