

# **Martin Luther King, Jr. | “Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam” | April 30, 1967, Riverside Church, New York | Transcribed**

The time has come for America to hear the truth about this tragic war. I've chosen to preach about the war in Vietnam today because I agree with Dante, that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a period of moral crisis maintain their neutrality. There comes a time when silence is betrayal.

The truth of these words is beyond doubt, but the mission to which they call us is a most difficult one. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom. There has never been such a monumental dissent during a war, by the American people.

Polls reveal that almost fifteen million Americans explicitly oppose the war in Vietnam. Additional millions cannot bring themselves around to support it. This reveals that millions have chosen to move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism, to the high grounds of firm dissent, based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history. Now, of course, one of the difficulties in speaking out today grows the fact that there are those who are seeking to equate dissent with disloyalty. It's a dark day in our nation when high-level

authorities will seek to use every method to silence dissent. But something is happening, and people are not going to be silenced. The truth must be told, and I say that those who are seeking to make it appear that anyone who opposes the war in Vietnam is a fool or a traitor or an enemy of our soldiers is a person that has taken a stand against the best in our tradition.

Many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. "Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent?" Peace and civil rights don't mix, they say. And so this morning, I speak to you on this issue, because I am determined to take the Gospel seriously. There is...a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I and others have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the Poverty Program. Then came the build-up in Vietnam. And I watched the program broken as if it was some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war. And I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money, like some demonic, destructive suction tube. And you may not know it, my friends, but it is estimated that we spend \$500,000 to kill each enemy soldier, while we spend only fifty-three dollars for each person classified as poor, and much of that fifty-three dollars goes for salaries to people who are not poor. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor, and attack it as such.

Perhaps the more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hope of the poor at home. It was sending their sons, and their brothers, and their husbands to fight and die in extraordinarily high proportion relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who

had been crippled by society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem. So we have been repeatedly faced with a cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same school room. So we watch them in brutal solidarity, burning the huts of a poor village. But we realize that they would hardly live on the same block in Chicago or Atlanta.

As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems they ask and rightly so, "So what about Vietnam?" They ask if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems. And, I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today, my own government. America and most of its newspapers applauded me in Montgomery. And I stood before thousands of Negroes getting ready to riot when my home was bombed and said, "We can't do it this way." They applauded us in the sit-in movement; we non-violently decided to sit in at lunch counters. They applauded us on the Freedom Rides when we accepted blows without retaliation. Oh, the press was so noble in its applause, and so noble in its praise when I was saying, Be non-violent toward Bull Connor; There's something strangely inconsistent about a nation and a press that will praise you when you say, "Be non-violent toward Jim Clark", but will curse and damn you when you say, "Be non-violent toward little brown Vietnamese children". There's something wrong with that press!

Another burden of responsibility was placed upon me in 1964. And I cannot forget that the Nobel Peace Prize was not just something taking place, but it was a commission—a commission to work harder than I had ever worked before for the brotherhood of Man. This

is a calling that takes me beyond national allegiances. But even if it were not present, I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me, the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the Good News was meant for all men, for communists and capitalists, for their children and ours, for black and white, for revolutionary and conservative. Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the One who loved His enemies so fully that he died for them? What, then, can I say to the Vietcong, or to Castro, or to Mao, as a faithful minister to Jesus Christ? Can I threaten them with death, or must I not share with them my life?

It is clear to me that there will be no meaningful solution until some attempt is made to know these people and hear their broken cries.

And who are we supporting in Vietnam today? It's a man by the name of general Ky [Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky] who fought with the French against his own people, and who said on one occasion that the greatest hero of his life is Hitler. This is who we are supporting in Vietnam today. Oh, our government and the press generally won't tell us these things, but God told me to tell you this morning. The truth must be told.

and all the while the people read our leaflets and received regular promises of peace and democracy and land reform. Now they languish under our bombs and consider us, not their fellow Vietnamese, the real enemy. They see the children degraded by our soldiers as they beg for food. We have destroyed their two most cherished institutions: the family and the village. We have destroyed their land and their crops. This is a role our nation has taken, the role of those who make peaceful revolutions impossible but refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that comes from the immense profits of overseas investments.

I'm 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, militarism and economic exploitation are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our present policies. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. 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.

Oh, my friends, if there is any one thing that we must see today is that these are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wounds 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. They are saying, unconsciously, as we say in one of our freedom songs, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around!" It is a sad fact that because of comfort, complacency, a morbid fear of communism, our proneness to adjust to injustice, the Western nations that initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world have now become the arch anti-revolutionaries. This has driven many to feel that only Marxism has a revolutionary spirit. Therefore, communism is a judgment against our failure to make democracy real and follow through on the revolutions that we initiated. 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, we shall boldly challenge unjust mores, and thereby speed up the day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies. This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing, unconditional love for all men. This oft misunderstood and misinterpreted concept, so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force, has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of mankind. And when I speak of love I'm not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is

beautifully summed up in the first epistle of John: “Let us love one another, for God is love. And every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us and his love is perfected in us.”

Let me say finally that I oppose the war in Vietnam because I love America. I speak out against this war, not in anger, but with anxiety and sorrow in my heart, and, above all, with a passionate desire to see our beloved country stand as the moral example of the world. I speak out against this war because I am disappointed with America. And there can be no great disappointment where there is not great love. I am disappointed with our failure to deal positively and forthrightly with the triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism. We are presently moving down a dead-end road that can lead to national disaster. America has strayed to the far country of racism and militarism. The home that all too many Americans left was solidly structured idealistically; its pillars were solidly grounded in the insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage. All men are made in the image of God. All men are brothers. All men are created equal. Every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth. Every man has rights that are neither conferred by, nor derived from the State—they are God-given. Out of one blood, God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth. What a marvelous foundation for any home! What a glorious and healthy place to inhabit. But America's strayed away, and this unnatural excursion has brought only confusion and bewilderment. It has left hearts aching with guilt and minds distorted with irrationality.

It is time for all people of conscience to call upon America to come back home. Come home, America. Omar Khayyam is right: “The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on.” I call on Washington today. I call on every man and woman of good will all over America today. I call on the young men of America who must make a choice today to take a stand on this issue. Tomorrow may be too late. The book may close. And don't let anybody

make you think that God chose America as his divine, messianic force to be a sort of policeman of the whole world. God has a way of standing before the nations with judgment, and it seems that I can hear God saying to America, "You're too arrogant!"

Now it isn't easy to stand up for truth and for justice. Sometimes it means being frustrated. When you tell the truth and take a stand, sometimes it means that you will walk the streets with a burdened heart. Sometimes it means losing a job...means being abused and scorned. It may mean having a seven, eight year old child asking a daddy, "Why do you have to go to jail so much?" And I've long since learned that to be a follower to the Jesus Christ means taking up the cross. And my bible tells me that Good Friday comes before Easter. Before the crown we wear, there is the cross that we must bear. Let us bear it—bear it for truth, bear it for justice, and bear it for peace. Let us go out this morning with that determination. And I have not lost faith. I'm not in despair. I haven't lost faith, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. We shall overcome because the bible is right: "You shall reap what you sow."

With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when justice will roll down like the waters of the lion and the lamb will lie down together, and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree, and none shall be afraid because the words of the Lord have spoken it. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when all over the world we will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we're free at last!" With this faith, we'll sing it as we're getting ready to sing it now. Men will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. And nations will not rise up against nations, neither shall they study war anymore. And I don't know about you, I ain't gonna study war no more.

**Transcript by Gary Handman, UC Berkeley Media Resources Center, 2006**