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Martin Luther King Jr. and moral hypocrisy in the Vietnam War

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While many Americans felt widespread discontent throughout the Vietnam War, one voice stood out among the dissenters as especially poignant and bold: that of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In his "Beyond Vietnam" speech, given on April 4, 1967, King denounced American involvement in the war, primarily because of the obligation that he felt to speak for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of the U.S. population. King's words were met with backlash and surrounded with controversy, his approval by African Americans and Caucasians dropped dramatically, and he lost the amiable relationship he previously held with President Lyndon B. Johnson. More than anything, King's dedication to his ministry's love for all people, his refusal to watch Americans prioritize other countries over America's domestic problems, and his committal to nonviolence made him unable to support American ventures in Vietnam, even in the face of ruthless opposition from Americans who supported him during the Civil Rights movement.

King's outspoken disapproval of the war alienated him more than ever. After being *TIME*'s person of the year in 1960, King's popularity began to decline as his focus shifted away from the South and toward urban poverty in the North, which frustrated many of his supporters, who had followed him since his initial focus on African American voting rights. Plus, some Americans associated instances of black militancy occurring across the nation with King's calls for change, even though he publicly denounced using violence as a device for change. The media criticized his entire antipoverty campaign, and his "Beyond Vietnam" speech was met with similar backlash. Many believed that King referenced a connection between the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement when no such connection existed. King foresaw this criticism and referenced it in his speech, saying, "For those who ask the question, 'Aren't you a Civil

Rights leader?’ and thereby mean to exclude me from the movement for peace, I have this further answer... 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.” Martin Luther King Jr. dedicated himself to peace in all forms; he felt morally obligated to advocate for both civil rights and anti-war initiatives on a large-scale, even if doing so would put him in a uniquely estranged position.

Furthermore, the presence of religion in King’s life endowed him with a strong belief that all humans are children of God. While he used this ideology to preach against segregation, particularly in his “I Have a Dream” speech, it also suggested that Americans did not treat the Vietnamese as equals during the Vietnam War. In King’s words: “Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood.” Specifically, he opposed the targeting of vulnerable non-military citizens in Vietnam. As the war continued, King felt that an entire culture watched their environment and families be torn apart, after already enduring generations of political turmoil. The role that America played in creating tension in Vietnam especially struck him: the country denied Vietnamese independence for decades and supported France in its reconquest of a nation already plagued by colonization and imperialism for decades, supported corrupt governments, and then ventured onto its own soil in the name of freedom and democracy. King defined himself as a voice for all children of God, and used his self-proclaimed responsibility to the Church as justification for criticizing the morality of the war.

Additionally, King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech expresses his belief that U.S. involvement in the war disproportionately affected young African Americans and the nation’s poor. He says that America sent higher proportions of men from poor families to Vietnam and

explains the effect of the war on poor families, who now faced dismantled family structures and the absence of fathers, sons, and brothers. King highlights the irony of sending young black people to fight for a nation in Vietnam that did not protect their rights at home. He similarly illustrates that when the nation focuses on Vietnam, they distract themselves from allocating resources and attention to domestic issues, including those of racial and economic discrimination.

In “Beyond Vietnam,” King adheres to the idea that diplomacy and pacifism are more powerful forces of social change than violence and war. King advocated for nonviolence throughout his life, and his nonviolent methods of protest generated much change for African Americans. He especially encouraged pacifism for African Americans frustrated by the social climate in the United States. As a result, he noticed the hypocrisy of advocating for a nation’s adolescents to practice diplomacy if their nation did not do the same:

They asked if our own nation wasn’t using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, 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. For the sake of those boys, for the sake of this government, for the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent, King said.

His skepticism of the war mirrored that of other anti-war Americans, who questioned whether the nation attempted more humane methods of solving international disputes.

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Martin Luther King Jr. dedicated his life to creating a better world for future generations.

His “Beyond Vietnam” speech illustrates his belief that the Vietnam War did not have a place in his vision of a better American future. Although his opinion was not an easy one to proclaim publicly, as it prompted much backlash from the media and public, King’s unwavering support for the world’s disadvantaged and his religious prerogative to defend all humans made him unable to defend America’s presence in the Vietnam War.