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12th Grade

2 December 2017

### The Man Who Stood Alone

Someone long ago once said "stand up for what you believe in, even if it means standing alone." Dr. Martin Luther King had long since understood the meaning of this quote. From the minute he began his civil rights crusade, he was met with an unrelenting torrent of opposition. Dr. King was different from those who stood before him, however. He did not get washed away in the surf of failure and criticism, but instead stood true against an entire nation for what he believed in because he knew it was the right thing to do. Accordingly, this drive to do the right thing would shock America one chilly April day in 1967. The day that Dr. King denounced Vietnam.

Before he went public about his beliefs, King had always privately expressed his discontent toward the Vietnam conflict. An FBI wiretapping of his closest advisors overheard him saying to them "how immoral this is. I think someone should outline how wrong we are" (New York Times, 2017). That someone turned out to be Dr. King himself; struck with the realization that his silence should be broken when he saw the burned and broken bodies of Vietnamese children in a magazine. "The images were unforgettable", he said "I came to the conclusion that I could no longer remain silent about an issue that was destroying the soul of our nation" (New York Times, 2017).

On the evening of April 4, 1967, his silence was broken. This was the day of the *Beyond Vietnam* speech. A highly controversial speech outlining why he thought the Vietnam War was immoral and counterproductive to the nation, its citizens and civil rights.

Dr. King first mentioned in his speech how the Vietnam war was taking away resources from the war on poverty; stating how he watched Vietnam continue to “draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube” (King Encyclopedia). He realized that with the onset of this war, the government would not deliver the proper money and resources to help the impoverished. In fact, the government was doing everything but helping the poor; King noting that the government “was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population” (King Encyclopedia).

He also called out the irony and hypocrisy of the war, preaching that the country was “taking the black young men who had been crippled by our 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” (King Encyclopedia). He saw cruel irony in the fact that blacks and whites fought side by side in “brutal solidarity” in the war, but would not be seated together in schools or “would hardly live on the same block in Chicago” (King Encyclopedia). In this regard, he viewed the war as a “cruel manipulation of the poor.”

Another reason Dr. King denounced the war was because it and our government was advertising violence as a solution to problems. He referenced his conversations with “rejected, angry young men” and stated how, when he preached unto them his belief of nonviolence they responded with “What about Vietnam?” They asked [Dr. King] if our own nation wasn’t using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted.” According to King, these “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” (King Encyclopedia).

King was also concerned with the suffering of Vietnamese citizens, summarizing his list of U.S. grievances against them with “We have destroyed their two most cherished institutions: the family and the village. We have destroyed their land and their crops. We have cooperated in the crushing of the nation’s only noncommunist revolutionary political force, the unified Buddhist Church. We have supported the enemies of the peasants of Saigon. We have corrupted their women and children and killed their men” (King Encyclopedia).

Finally, Dr. King mentions the lies told by the U.S. government, the pointless goal of the war and the continued suffering and meaningless deaths of U.S. troops; stating that “We are adding cynicism to the process of death, for they must know after a short period there that none of the things we claim to be fighting for are really involved. Before long they must know that their government has sent them into a struggle among Vietnamese, and the more sophisticated surely realize that we are on

the side of the wealthy, and the secure, while we create a hell for the poor" (King Encyclopedia).

After Dr. King Delivered this speech "168 major newspapers the next day denounced him" (National Public Radio, 2010). The New York Times and the Washington Post published editorials, the Times calling theirs "Dr. King's Error," and the Post calling theirs "A Tragedy." His speech also antagonized president Lyndon B. Johnson, causing him to disinvite Dr. King to the White House and to break off their historic partnership. (National Public Radio, 2010).

Dr. King gave this speech at a time when denouncing Vietnam was a very unpopular thing to do. The reason for this was, at the time, according to Gallup polls, the majority of Americans actually supported the Vietnam war. In 1967, the year he gave this speech, 52% of Americans viewed the Vietnam conflict favorably (Gallup, 2000). Support for the war can also be seen in a Harris Poll taken at this time, showing that nearly three quarters of Americans disagreed with Dr. King on this issue (National Public Radio, 2010).

King also angered many of his followers and admirers by delivering this speech. Many of them viewed him as trying to link the war and the civil rights movement. The Pittsburgh Courier, a leading black newspaper in the country, said King was "tragically misleading" black Americans. The NAACP said it was improper for him to link the civil rights to opposition to the war (New York times, 2017).

Today, the Vietnam War is widely recognized as a mistake. The echoed words of the Anti-Vietnam protesters no longer seem like leftist radicalism, rather headlines preaching the truth. Dr. King knew that he too had to preach the truth.

"I come to this great magnificent house of worship tonight because my conscience leaves me no other choice." No direct quote could better express the will and intentions of Dr. King. He spoke out against this war because his conscious told him it was the right thing to do. He stood against the opinion of a nation because his conscious told him it was the right thing to do. He stood against his advisors because his conscious told him it was the right thing to do. He stood alone. Despite these overwhelming factors he stood alone and had the courage to speak the truth. Why? Perhaps Dr. King said it best: "A time comes when silence is betrayal" (King Encyclopedia).

## References

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