

Sorrows of Empire

Dr. King's Speech on War and Peace

Thirty-six years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a speech that changed my life. I was a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York city in 1967, during the peak of the Vietnam war. Almost by accident a friend invited me across the street to hear Dr. King deliver a comprehensive anti-war address at Riverside Church.



It is not the drama, the excitement of the occasion, nor King's mellifluous voice passing over the hushed sanctuary as he described the holocaust of Indochina. It is not even the way history later vindicated King's teachings on war – everything he predicted came to pass – that makes his 1967 address so memorable to me. It is the vitality of his teachings for our own lives, the immediate relevance to the arrogance and jingoism of our time, that compels me to recall and reread the Peacemaker's masterpiece once again.

The economic and moral crisis we are facing today – the ubiquity of violent crime, the endemic clutch of drugs, the growing poverty of the working poor, the ruin of the Bill of Rights, the suffocation of millions of decent lives in the ghettos of our cities – all date back to that fateful turn when American leaders, pressured by big corporations, chose war over peace, empire over civil rights and social progress.

Dr. King saw our crisis coming. "A few years ago," he began from his well-lit pulpit, speaking in reference to America's anti-poverty programs, "there was a shining moment in our struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched the programs [become] broken. I was compelled to see the war as the enemy of the poor."

As Dr. King analyzed the hope-wrecking nature of war, I stopped taking notes and listened with my heart as he described not only the devastation abroad and the injuries and scarred lives of the working class youth returning home, but the spiritual costs of imperialism – the mendacity of our leaders, the disillusionment of youth. "A nation," he said, "that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

King reminded his listeners that U.S. lawlessness abroad breeds violence within the United States as well. "As I walked among the desperate, rejected, angry men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. But they ask – and rightly so – what about Vietnam? Wasn't our own nation using massive doses of violence to solve its problems? 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 against the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government." King never used the term "blowback," but his message was clear. When America sows the wind, it will reap the whirlwind in due time.

The Vietnam war is past. The cold war is over. But King's teachings about the sorrows of empire, the moral and social costs of militarism, are as timely today as they were 36 years ago. There is still no Marshall plan for our cities, no jobs program for our youth yearning for hope and direction. The near-400 billion dollar military budget is a mockery of social justice. Americans pay more for "defense" than all potential adversaries combined. According to the Congressional Budget Office, federal deficits over the next five years will hit \$1.08 trillion, a military induced deficit that is robbing our children of housing, education, health care and chances for a better life.

U.S. corporations now globalize weaponry and violence for profit, and the U.S. has become the primary font of arms proliferation in the world. Subsidized by American taxpayers, U.S. corporations – Lockheed-Martin, General Electric, General Dynamics, McDonnell Douglas, Boeing, Hughes Aircraft, to name a few – sell lethal weapons to more than 40 countries. Assault helicopters, tanks, 50-caliber machine guns, hellfire anti-armor missiles, land-mine dispensing pods, Stinger missiles, fighter jets, rifles, guns – mechanized violence has become the main currency of American foreign policy. U.S. companies, along with France, helped Iraq build its arsenal of poison gas and chemical weapons in the '80s. Dr. King once described the sale of weaponry on a world scale as one of the great social crimes of the modern age.

King's 36-year-old speech still sears my soul because my own country is still "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world." We are all victims, in King's words, of that "deadly western arrogance that has poisoned the international atmosphere for so long."

I left Riverside Church inspired by the intensity of the event. The following day, King's patriotic address caused an outcry in the media. *TIME* magazine called it "demagogic slander, a script for Radio Hanoi."

Nevertheless, I can still hear our teacher reciting the words of James Russell Lowell: "Though the cause of evil prosper, yet 'tis truth alone is strong."

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UNBOUNDED COMPASSION

This latest terror alert is a fire drill with live ammunition, designed to distract us from the very real mounting public awareness of our unelected regime's lies, misdeeds, blunders, and real motives. The neo-f***er, conservative (oops, almost said the "F" word, free pass to the Global Gulag) Bush administration is facing more heat from the Supreme Court, moderate Republicans (yes, Martha, there *is* such a thing!) and just plain Joes like you and me to domestic economic and security issues, and mounting opposition from the rest of the world toward our openly oppressive "strip-mine-the-world" imperial policy.

The solution: No problem! We'll show those disloyal pinkos — let's have an alert! And just for good measure, let's throw in some media echo-chamber stories about air travel and shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles at Christmas, when millions of people travel! And fingerprint those (maybe terrorist) foreign journalists on short visas! Plant the seed of terror in people's minds and it will grow...talk is cheaper than Al-Qaeda in this Field of Nightmare. And, incidentally, provide job security to Tom Ridge and his millions of trained (?) employees.

And turn the (former) U.S. into a monolithic police state. But, hey, they'll count to three before they shoot. How compassionate can a conservative get?

Michael Anderson
Oakridge

FIELDS OF DREAMS

George Beres (1/8) couldn't be more wrong about the multi-sport fields built at the four Eugene high schools. This community continues to have far fewer playing fields than it should. My daughter played soccer at South and the availability of the new artificial turf fields was a godsend for her and many young athletes in Eugene. Thousands of young people use those facilities and by playing right at the schools they build school spirit, too. Beres says that the kids should play football at Autzen.

Playing a high school football game at Autzen with 1,000 fans tucked in a 50,000 seat stadium may be cost-effective from Beres' perspective, but it short-changes the young people in our community. It is penny wise and pound foolish.

I have noticed that Beres seems to relish writing anti-UO letters to the local media. I suspect the opportunity to criticize the UO was too much for him to resist and he dragged the high school fields in as the segue.

Whatever. My hat is off to the voters in this community who showed that they care about the kids.

Randy Kolb
Eugene

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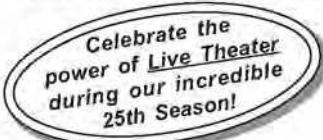
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