



From Reformer to Revolutionary

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s path from reformer to revolutionary was short but unflinching. When he became involved in the civil rights movement in Montgomery, Alabama in 1957 he spoke of redemptive suffering and love that would change the hearts and souls of the society that denied to black Americans the rights of citizenship.

By 1968, the year of his death, King had publically connected the war in Vietnam with poverty at home; the American corporations with oppression in the Third World; and U.S. imperialism with the revolutionary fervor abroad. He had extended his quest for brotherhood to a call for peace and disarmament. He had advocated a basic restructuring of economic and political power in the United States and had called for a massive nonviolent movement to bring about this change.

When a theology student at Crozer Seminary, King described himself as a Marxist economically, believing that the capitalist system was predicated on exploitation, prejudice and poverty and that conditions would not improve without a new economic order.

As years passed he realized how extensive these changes must be. He realized that moral pleas to white businessmen brought limited results while the effect of boycotts and pickets that hurt income brought results.

"For the last twelve years we have been in a reform movement . . .", he said in 1967. "But after Selma and the voting rights bill (1965) we moved into a new era, what must be an era of revolution. I think we must see the great distinction here between a reform movement and a revolutionary movement." A revolution raises questions about the whole society. ". . . this means a revolution of values and other things . . . the whole structure of American life must be changed."

"If the church in the South would stand up for the Rights of Negroes, there would be no murder or brutality," he wrote for *Ebony* shortly before his death. "The awful thing about the South is that Southerners are making the Marxist analyses of history more accurate than the Christian hope that men can be persuaded through teaching and preaching to live a new and better life. In the South businessmen act more quickly for economic considerations than do churchmen from moral considerations."

King told his SCLC staff in 1967 that "we must recognize that we can't solve our problems now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power."

As King's Movement made gains in the South and he looked to the North he realized that even after shattering segregation in the South, blacks who lived in the large industrial cities of the North would still be caught in the hopeless horror of poverty. "What good does it do to be able to eat at a lunch counter if you can't buy a hamburger?" he asked.

"In the North there are brothers and sisters who are suffering discrimination that is even more agonizing, in a sense, than in the South. In the South, at least, the Negro can see progress, whereas in the North all he sees is retrogression."

In the cities of the North, black people were sunk in the mire of poverty with few avenues of escape. They had lost their faith in the churches and the ministers and were caught in an apathy that exploded into violence.

They were faced with white middle class "moderates" who agreed with their goals of jobs, better education and housing, but resisted every effort to implement those goals. The reaction of the poor whites was even more distressing. It was they who reacted violently, viewing blacks as a threat to their economic existence.

King realized that the poor blacks and the poor whites were in the same situation and were being used against each other. In 1968 he said that issues of economic class were more crucial and less susceptible to change than the issue of race and ethnicity. "We are dealing in a sense with class issues; we're dealing with problems of the gulf between the haves and the have-nots." And, "we are engaged in a class struggle."

The Vietnam War

King's last great crusade was against the war in Vietnam. During the last year of his life he spoke repeatedly against the war. He saw it not only as an act of U.S. imperialism but as a direct threat to the poor at home and abroad.

His stand against the war not only brought the anger of the government but separation from and condemnation by other black leaders—Roy Wil-

kens, Whitney Young, Carl Rowan, Ralph Bunche, and others—who considered foreign policy to be beyond the proper realm of a civil rights leader.

"I cannot speak about the great themes of violence and nonviolence, of social change and hope for the future, without reflecting on the tremendous violence of Vietnam."

King saw a direct impact of the war on the poverty program. "The promises of the Great Society have been shot down on the battlefield of Vietnam," he said. There were some small beginnings, he said, "Then came the build-up in Vietnam, and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were 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." He reiterated his conviction that "failure to deal positively and forthrightly with the triple evils of racism, extreme materialism and militarism" and called on the peace movement to organize. "We must demonstrate, teach and preach until the very foundations of the nation are shaken."

Black men made up 20 per cent of the combat troops in Vietnam, where they were fighting under the slogan of democracy. "At home they know there is no democracy for their people, and on their return they will be restored to a grim life of second-class citizens even if they are bedecked with heroes' medals."

The U.S. was in Vietnam to bring freedom to the Vietnam people, our government said. "Now they languish under our bombs and consider us—not their fellow Vietnamese—the cruel enemy. . . . They move sadly and apathetically as we herd them off the land of their fathers into concentration camps where minimal social needs are rarely met. . . . They watch as we poison their water, as we kill a million acres of their crops, and the wander into the hospitals with at least twenty casualties from American fire power to one Vietcong-inflicted injury. They wander into the towns and see thousands of children homeless, without clothes, running in packs on the streets like animals. They see children selling their sisters to our soldiers, soliciting for their mothers."

The U.S. began the war by subverting the Geneva Accords to prevent the election of Ho Chi Minh and it was the U.S. that continuously escalated the violence, he said. The U.S. was responsible for the war and the U.S. must end it.

"I speak as a child of God and a brother to those suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the price we have taken."

Toward Revolution

King's vision of peace extended beyond Vietnam to the liberation of the Third World. Too often, he said, the U.S. military is deployed "to maintain social stability for our investments" not only in Vietnam, but in "counter-revolutionary action" in Guatemala, Peru, Columbia and elsewhere.

King said the Vietnam war was really a symptom of a far deeper problem in the American spirit—that of continuously supporting the dictators of the world rather than the liberation movements.

He saw the need for a "radical revolution of values". A true revolution of values would cause the American people to question the fairness and justice of its foreign policy; would question the great contrast between poverty and wealth. "With righteous indignation it will look across the sea and see individual capitalists in the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America only to take the profits 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' . . ."

Nonviolent Mass Action

King sought to bring what he described as three types of youth together: The largest group was struggling to adapt to the prevailing values of society—the system of government, the social stratification, the economic relationships—but were still searching for answers to ethical questions. The

second group wanted to alter the system, agreeing that only by structural change can current evils be eliminated. The third group was the "hippies," who were attempting to reject society, but had a dream of peace.

A nonviolent active resistance movement, including massive civil disobedience, could unite the three groups taking peaceful vision from the hippies, a sense of urgency from the radicals, and draw the undecided through a sense of purpose.

There was not much time, King said, in December of 1967. "The revolutionary spirit is already world-wide. If the anger of the peoples of the world at the injustice of things is to be channeled into a revolution of love and creativity, we must begin now to work, urgently, with all the peoples, to shape a new world."

Poor People's Campaign

King planned to show that nonviolent direct-action and massive civil disobedience can be effective when waged on a national scale.

The dispossessed of the nation—black and white—must organize a revolution against this society, "not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures . . ."

Beginning in January of 1968, he began recruiting three thousand of the poorest citizens from ten rural and urban areas to lead a "sustained, massive, direct-action" campaign in Washington, D.C. A poor people's caravan would begin in Roxbury, Mass., and proceed through northern cities; another would begin in the Mississippi delta. They were scheduled to arrive in Washington on April 22nd.

These three thousand, trained in nonviolence, would live in a tent city in Washington and repeatedly place their demands before Congress, the President and the government. Many people would come and play a supporting role "deciding to be poor for a time right along with the dispossessed who are asking for their right to jobs or income—jobs, income, the demolition of slums, the rebuilding by the people who live there of new communities in their place, in fact, a new economic deal for the poor."

The campaign, which was conceived in the Birmingham jail, would grow into a nation-wide movement that would include economic boycotts, selective buying, rent refusal and other methods including mass demonstrations.

An International Peace Movement

Could nonviolence bring about an international revolution and peace? King believed it could. He was well aware that the U.S. economic system was responsible for poverty at home and oppression and war abroad and believed an international nonviolent movement coming out of the U.S. could force change.

King said in 1968 that the crisis faced by the poor in the United States is inseparable from an "international emergency which involves the poor, the dispossessed, the exploited of the whole world."

He felt the next stage for the Movement was to create an international movement in the developed nations to make it politically necessary for those nations to assist the developing nations. "We in the West must bear in mind that the poor countries are poor primarily because we have exploited them through political and economic colonialism. Americans in particular must help their nation repent of her modern economic imperialism."

He advocated a unity with the people of Latin America specifically, since many of Latin America's problems have roots in the U.S. A solid, united movement would bring pressure both on the U.S. government and on the governments of Latin America.

Even the entrenched racism of South Africa could be tackled on this level. Massive pressure on the governments of the U.S. and Great Britain could bring them to the decision to end all economic interaction with South Africa. Almost every corporation in the two nations that has ties with South Africa also is economically dependent on its own government. Action by those two nations alone could bring South Africa to its knees.

In his Christmas sermon of 1967, King repeated his call for internationalism: ". . . the time has come for men to experiment with nonviolence in all areas of human conflict, and that means nonviolence on an international scale."

Loyalities must become ecumenical, he said. "Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective."

"I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down the militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. . . . I still believe that we shall overcome. . . ."

—Oslo, 1965