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OPINION

A Powerful Warning Still Relevant Today

Dr. King's antiwar speech 50 years later

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Fifty years ago on April 4, 1967, our prophet Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave the historic speech "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" at New York City's Riverside Church. It was his first major public antiwar speech and a powerful warning that a rise in racial hatred, militarism and violence could destroy

America.

In his essay "The Land Beyond," originally published in *Sojourners* magazine in 1983, Dr. Vincent Harding, the brilliant historian and theologian and close King friend who helped draft the speech, wrote that King's message not only required us to struggle once more with the meaning of his words, but it also presses us to wrestle as he did, with all of the tangled, bloody, and glorious meaning of our nation (and ourselves), its purposes (and our own), its direction (and our own), its hope (and our own)." His in-

structions for how we should re-read the speech are even more searing today.

Dr. King was speaking out against the Vietnam War specifically but also arguing that "the war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit" and that it was time for our nation to undergo "a radical revolution of values."

"When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable

of being conquered," King said. "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

President Trump's very first budget blueprint, which proposes an increase in defense spending for 2018 of \$54 billion (a 10 percent increase) with \$54 billion in cuts to programs serving the poor and vulnerable and addressing basic needs and other non-defense discretionary spending to pay for it, plainly shows Dr. King's message is not being heard or heeded.

Just as starkly and presciently, Dr. King went on to say the revolution in our national values must reject nationalism and hate: "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

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Racism, Militarism and Extreme Materialism

Is it too late to heed MLK's warning?



BY KEVIN MARTIN AND THE REV. DR. HERBERT DAUGHTRY

Fifty years ago this month, a year to the day before he was murdered, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called us to overcome the giant triplets plaguing our society – racism, militarism and extreme materialism – in his "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence" address at Riverside Church in Manhattan. In his speech, Dr. King decried our descent into a 'thing-oriented society.' One wonders what he would think of our current, thing-oriented president.

In the remarkable speech, co-written with the late Vincent Harding, King also exclaimed, "a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

Unfortunately that is even more relevant today, as military spending consumes well over half the federal discretionary budget, and President Trump is advocating a nearly 10 percent, \$54 billion increase, equivalent to the entire annual military budget of Russia, for the Pentagon, and severe cuts to foreign aid, diplomacy, social and environmental programs.

King also powerfully, and accurately, linked violence in U.S. cities

to our foreign policy, especially the terrible war in Vietnam (noting the Vietnamese must see Americans as 'strange liberators,') and acknowledged the pressure put on him by civil rights leaders to keep silent about his opposition to the war, which he of course could not do. Yet for many, the giant triplets rubric still resonates most powerfully today among all the words of wisdom King and Harding imparted in the speech.

Racism, extreme materialism and militarism are still inextricably linked, and still prevent our society's becoming anything close to King's "beloved community." Of the three, militarism may be the one about which Americans are most ignorant or most in denial.

No serious person could say we have overcome racism, or dealt with the extreme materialism and economic injustice and unsustainability of our "thing-oriented society." However, the pervasive equating of patriotism with support for war, charges of being soft on communism, terrorism or defense, and cynical, coercive 'support the

troops' displays (when the best way to support them would be to stop our incessant wars) seemingly prevent any serious examination of U.S. militarism.

How many Americans know the U.S. has been at war for all but a relatively few years (fewer than 20) of our history since 1776? Or that the U.S. has more than 900 foreign military bases? (China has one and is about to build a second, near ours in Djibouti.) Or that we maintain nearly 7,000 nuclear warheads, all tens, hundreds or even thousands of times more destructive than the Hiroshima bomb that killed 140,000 people? Or that the U.S. conducted more than 1,000 nuclear 'test' explosions, and under President Obama, recently embarked on a 30-year, at least \$1 trillion scheme to upgrade our entire nuclear weapons arsenal (unsurprisingly, every other nuclear state is now doing the same, sparking a new arms race)? Or that the U.S. military is the biggest consumer of fossil fuels on the planet?

Ignorance or denial about these facts is dangerous, to our society

falling behind in nearly every indicator of social and environmental health as we continue to invest in the war machine, and to the people on the receiving end of our bombs.

How many countries are we bombing right now? At least seven we know of: Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. And as Dr. King claimed the bombs we dropped on Vietnam also exploded in American cities, the blowback to the U.S. from all the anger we sow and enemies we reap in these countries and around the world, will surely harm our country.

So what is it about the United States? Are we in the grip of what President Eisenhower warned us, the military-industrial complex (that he did a lot to empower before decrying it)? Weapons contractors make a killing, but they don't really help the economy. Military spending is about the worst way to create jobs and stimulate the economy. Education is the best, creating 2.5 times more jobs than military spending, according to economists at the Uni-

versity of Massachusetts.

We doubt anyone has any satisfactory answers to why our country is so uniquely militaristic, yet seemingly oblivious to the consequences. Perhaps peace and social justice activists and political leaders have for too long failed to integrate the struggles to overcome the giant triplets.

If that is the case, Martin Luther King Jr. still points the way toward a solution, 50 years after he first called out to us. Is it too late to hear his wisdom and change course?

As the impressive grassroots resistance to Trumpism continues to show up for racial, economic, social and environmental justice, we must also show up for peace and disarmament if we hope to one day realize King's beloved community.

Kevin Martin, syndicated by PeaceVoice, is President of Peace Action, the country's largest grassroots peace and disarmament organizations. The Rev. Dr. Herbert Daughtry is the National Presiding Minister of the House of the Lord Churches.

Providing Insurance and Financial Services
Home Office, Bloomington, Illinois 61710

Ernest J. Hill, Jr. Agent

4946 N. Vancouver Avenue,
Portland, OR 97217
503 286 1103 Fax 503 286 1146
ernie.hill.h5mb@statefarm.com
24 Hour Good Neighbor Service®



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The Law Offices of
Patrick John Sweeney, P.C.

Patrick John Sweeney

Attorney at Law

1549 SE Ladd, Portland, Oregon

Portland: (503) 244-208

Hillsboro: (503) 244-2081

Facsimile: (503) 244-2084

Email: Sweeney@PDXLawyer.com