

Call on Obama to End the ‘War on Drugs’

On April 4, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stepped to the podium of the Riverside Church in New York to vigorously proclaim his opposition to the War in Vietnam. It was one of the most powerful orations among numerous remarkable speeches delivered during his brief but extraordinary life.

In articulating a persuasive moral and practical framework for his stance, Dr. King said: “... I knew 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. So, I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and attack it as such.”

Equally disturbing for King was the disproportionate impact of the war not only on the poor but specifically young Black men. He went on to say: “We were taking the Black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them 8,000 miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem.”

Dr. King’s decision to visibly and vocally oppose the War in Vietnam was no doubt complicated by the fact that the war was being promoted, prosecuted and

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defended by Lyndon Baines Johnson, the president who had courageously responded to Bloody Sunday and the Selma to Montgomery March by working for and signing the historic Voting Rights Act of 1965. President Johnson was viewed as a friend of civil rights and social programs favorable to poor and working people. Nonetheless, King saw the Vietnam as an ill-conceived and

civil rights legislation.

It is in that same spirit, that on April 4, 2013, a group of social justice, drug and criminal justice policy reform advocates will intensify the demand for an end to the War on Drugs and mass incarceration and call on President Obama to invest resources to revitalize America’s “dark ghettos.” Just as Dr. King saw the War in Vietnam as wasting massive resources on an ill-conceived and immoral war, drug and criminal justice reform analysts, experts and advocates have concluded that the War on Drugs is a flawed strategy complete with a contemporary “demonic suction tube” which has wasted billions of dollars that could and should have been used to invest in distressed urban communities.

Equally distressing, as Michelle Alexander brilliantly documents in her classic book “The New Jim Crow, the War on Drugs” is a racially biased policy/strategy targeting and disproportionately devastating Black and Brown communities. As the brothers and sisters in the “hood” say, “the war on drugs is a war on us.”

How else can we make sense of the fact that African Americans make up an estimated 15 percent of drug users, but account for 27

percent of those arrested on drug charges, 59 percent of those convicted and 74 percent of all drug offenders sentenced to prison?

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The War on Drugs, policing, criminalization and mass incarceration have become substitutes for social, economic and racial justice in America’s dark ghettos. The damages to our communities have been devastating – and it must

moral and political crisis that demands direct, targeted economic and social policies and programs to create wholesome, sustainable communities. The president and the nation have reacted as if there is no face to the millions who are suffering in the “dark ghettos” of this land. These millions do have a face and it is overwhelmingly Black.

It is time for President Barack Obama to have the audacity to declare a state of emergency in urban inner-city areas

end.

As we gather in Dr. King’s memory on April 4 this year, our charge must be to call on President Obama to exercise leadership by proclaiming to the nation that it is time to end the War on Drugs and treat the crisis of drugs as a public health rather than criminal justice issue – a dramatic paradigm shift which, at a minimum, will lead to decriminalization of marijuana, increased funding for drug education and treatment, and a national dialogue on the desirability and feasibility of regulating and taxing drugs.

It is time for President Barack Obama to have the audacity to declare a state of emergency in urban inner-city areas, where millions of Black people are suffering and struggle to survive. It is a

On April 4, we will honor the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., his opposition to the Vietnam War and his call for an Economic Bill of Rights. We hope President Obama and the nation will heed our call and the walls of ignorance, indifference, hostility, blatant and benign neglect, racial bias and injustice will come tumbling down, clearing the way for the rescue and revitalization of the urban inner-city neighborhoods/communities in this country.

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