

The Clash Over Dr. King's Legacy

The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial is fittingly located between the monuments to Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. But historian William Loren Katz asks which version of the martyred civil rights leader will be remembered, the gentle advocate for racial tolerance or the fierce activist for peace and justice.

By William Loren Katz

It has taken a hurricane to postpone the dedication of the long-awaited monument to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Washington – the first monument on the Mall for an individual who is not a president, not a white man and not a war leader.

King repeatedly proved he was not frightened by forces packing the power of hurricanes. He calmly faced many human storms before he was assassinated in April 1968.

However, since major corporations contributed to the monument, how will Dr. King's message and courage be presented to the American public and remembered by children?

In 1964 when Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, frightened by King's popularity since his 1963 March on Washington, called him "the most notorious liar in the country" and ordered the FBI to increase its surveillance and of the man and his movement.

A more recent assessment of King was offered this Jan. 13 when the Pentagon commemorated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day with an address by the Defense Department's general counsel, PenJeh C. Johnson, who insisted that King would understand why the United States was at war today.

Speaking to Defense Department officials, Johnson frankly acknowledged that King, in the final year of his life, became an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam War. But Johnson hastily added that today's wars are not out of line with the Nobel Peace Prize winner's teachings.

"I believe that if Dr. King were alive today, he would recognize that we live in a complicated world, and that our nation's military should not and cannot lay down its arms and leave the American people vulnerable to terrorist attack."

Really?

According to civil rights veteran and noted feminist scholar and author Jo Freeman, who worked for King's SCLC beginning in 1965, King repeatedly opposed U.S. intervention in Vietnam before small gatherings, and only reluctantly and

temporarily stopped when he warned that President Lyndon Johnson might withdraw the "war on poverty" if King continued.

But King's conscience, and Johnson's escalation of the war, drove him into a full-blown, highly public denunciation of the war in 1967. On April 4 at the Riverside Church in New York City, Dr. King delivered his speech, "Declaration of Independence from the War In Vietnam."

It was not only eloquent and passionate but also carefully reasoned and as unambiguous in its message as its title.

Dr. King's call for U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam was also hard to ignore. That spring, he and Stokely Carmichael led a massive peace march to the United Nations building.

King's war opposition also brought challenges from his enemies both to his leadership and to his moral purpose. There were more death threats and less government protection when he needed it most. He expected all that.

In 1967, King was denounced by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and other parts of the liberal and the mainstream media. He was even challenged by some civil rights allies.

King had dared to speak at a time when U.S. officials from the president on down, warned that communism's triumph in Vietnam would lead to victories across Asia and beyond. They used this "domino theory" to make Americans as fearful of communism as they are of today's Middle Eastern terrorists.

But King was resolute and unmoved. "A time comes when silence is betrayal," King said. He minced few words, referring to "my own government" as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."

Has much changed today when the U.S. boasts the largest military budget in history, one larger than all other countries combined? The United States has untold bases across the globe, and its armed forces have been kept in Iraq and Afghanistan longer than in World War II.

Weekly we hear of the drone strikes in Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere and how the U.S. government is contemplating air strikes against Iran's nuclear building sites. U.S. casualties are rising in the Middle East, and there seems no end in sight for U.S. occupation and war.

Would Dr. King have called for withdrawal from Vietnam and, had he lived, not called for a withdrawal from Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya? Would he have failed to see parallels that are as obvious as they are frightening?

In his Riverside address, Dr. King pointed out that “our leaders refused to tell us the truth” about the war in Vietnam. Can we ever forget that the U.S. attack on Iraq was initiated to destroy weapons of mass destruction that didn’t exist, and retaliate against a Saddam Hussein and Iraq that had no part in the 9/11 attacks on the United States?

In the name of “Iraqi freedom,” American leaders ordered the torture of prisoners, even sending some to other countries or U.S.-run “black sites” for torture; to assure “democracy,” the U.S. supported corrupt leaders who lacked popular support.

The people of Vietnam, King said, “must see Americans as strange liberators.”

In Afghanistan today those who suffer from drone attacks directed from afar, and from deadly night ground searches for terrorists, do not see Americans as liberators. They see a distant, imperial power occupying their country, killing innocent civilians, and as doomed to fail as earlier invaders of Afghanistan.

“The madness of Vietnam,” Dr. King said in 1967, will “totally” poison “America’s soul.” He told how U.S. involvement in Vietnam “eviscerated” its war on poverty begun by President Johnson, and instead had its “funds and energies” and “men and skills” drawn into a war “like some demonic, destructive suction tube.”

What happens to “America’s soul” as the U.S. fights three Middle Eastern wars, its budget spins out of control, and joblessness and hopelessness reach proportions known only during the Great Depression?

Dr. King emphasized how the Vietnam War was “devastating the hopes of the poor at home” and “sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight in extraordinarily high proportion relative to the rest of the population.”

In 2011, a volunteer army draws even more heavily on the poor, those without jobs, men and women losing hope of finding meaningful work. Dr. King said then “I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.”

Would the man who organized a Poor People’s March on Washington before his assassination be silent now?

Toward the end of his address at the Riverside Church, Dr. King said:

“Somehow this madness must cease. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam and the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam ...

“The great initiative in the war is ours. The initiative to stop must be ours.”

Was not Martin Luther King, Jr. reaching beyond Vietnam when he warned of “approaching spiritual death” and called for “a significant and profound change in American life and policy” and insisted “we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.”

Was he only speaking of Vietnam when he said, “War is not the answer?”

We the people have to make sure it is neither the J. Edgar Hoover spin or the Pentagon version, but the real legacy of Dr. King that is acknowledged and celebrated. We owe that to future generations.

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