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“Beyond Vietnam” & Beyond King’s Known Work

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. is a household name not only in the United States but globally. Known as the face and proprietor of the American Civil Rights Movement, King is an international symbol of racial equality, freedom, and justice. The younger generations see this American hero through a lens of patriotism and watered-down teachings. King’s message extends far beyond our common knowledge of his speech “I Have a Dream” and the Civil Rights Movement. He was radical not only because he wanted equality, which has long been ingrained deep within the soul of this country, but also because of his ethical morals, beliefs, and optimism of reforming the most fundamental levels of American society. His famous speech, though slowly regressing to the shadows, “Beyond Vietnam,” was the start of King reaching beyond racial issues, and into his true intentions for society.

MLK was born at the starting of the Great Depression on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. Despite the economic and racially prejudiced systems of the time, King grew up in a fairly financially stable family. He pursued education with fervor, attending Morehouse College at fifteen and graduating at nineteen with a BA in sociology. The early half of his life seemed streamlined in its simplicity; King was a gifted individual who had a prosperous career ahead. To quote the man, “I have never experienced the feeling of not having the basic necessities of life. If I had a problem I could always call Daddy. Things were solved. [...] This is not to say that I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth; far from it. I always had desire to work, and I would

spend my summers working.” The harsh reality behind King’s statement is that the acts of segregation were simply a fact of life, and although he did not experience the worst of Jim Crow’s wrath, King had his fair share of exposure to the twisted ideologies that plagued the country.

One of the more famous incidents in King’s childhood was when his white friend distanced himself from him. The two had met at the early age of three, but the children slowly drifted away once they started attending separate schools. One day the white boy, per his father’s orders, told King he could no longer socialize with him. This was MLK’s first experience with the issue of race and segregation, and one that would stick with him for the rest of his life. Contrary to most expectations, King originally did not take lightly to these discriminatory acts, but rather developed a deep hatred for the opposing race as a whole. He recounted, “I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person. As I grew older and older this feeling continued to grow.”

Another incident was in high school when King took a bus with his teacher, Mrs. Bradley, back to Atlanta. The melancholy irony of the situation is the high schooler had just finished giving a speech called “The Negro and the Constitution.” Known as one of the most famous examples of the Jim Crow laws, immortalized in Rosa Park’s famous act, he and Mrs. Bradley were ordered to give their seats up for their lighter-skinned passengers. Being the impassioned young man he was, King was defiant in moving as the bus driver spewed profanities at them. It was only through the urgent pleas of Mrs. Bradley that he relented. Now standing up, King felt the purest forms of anger and frustration for that long ninety-mile trip back home.

It is hard to know exactly when King’s ideology shifted to one full of peace and love, but part of it could be contributed to his brief time in the north. Before he went to college, King

spent the summer in Simsbury, Connecticut, to earn money for his education. He attended Sunday church absent of racial prejudice—interestingly the only African Americans to attend at all. The harmony that existed in the north was liberating to King. He was able to attend a diner and not be seated off in the colored section, or even be turned down. When he returned to Georgia, it was a bitter reaction, but the trip had given King hope. He was still angry, but now he knew that rage was not in vain, nor to be silent. Change was possible in the country, and King would help get the ball rolling.

Ideas and visions of the future were prevalent in King's mind when he attended Morehouse College. However, King's end goal for society lacked a path and a name. In 1944, his freshman year of college, he found the works of Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau's essay "On Civil Disobedience" was a heavy influence on King's future methods of protest and resistance. King has credited Thoreau with his Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-56), The Albany Movement (1961), and many other forms of protest. Thoreau's peaceful idealism aided MLK's vision for peaceful protest, but during this time, he was further influenced by his faith.

Religion and faith had always been an integral part of King's life, and coming from a lineage of ministers, King was aspiring to become one as well. In 1948, while studying for a Bachelor of Divinity degree at Crozer Theological Seminary, he read the book *Christianity and the Social Crisis* by Walter Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch's ideas expanded upon those of Thoreau, citing the root cause for government corruption as a lack of fundamental ethics. Rauschenbusch cited a higher being and dedication to faith as the remedy for this. One of the biggest takeaways King surmounted, in addition to the social gospel, was the idea that social problems were exacerbated moral issues. King appraises Rauschenbusch's work, writing, "[His work] left an indelible imprint on my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social

concern which had already grown up in me.” King would continue to refine his thinking and his social life for the next decade, attending Boston University and marrying Coretta Scott in 1953. Two years later in 1955, two pivotal events would start and not converge till 1967: the Vietnam War and the start of MLK’s fight for civil rights.

The 1950s and 60s of America were tumultuous, to say the least. The U.S. had emerged from the Second Great War victorious and the leading nation of the world. Even so, the equally powerful rise of the Soviet Union across the Atlantic birthed the Red Scare and the start of the Cold War. America had finally accepted its role at the front of global politics and all of the hate and hypocrisy that came with it. The nation, since its conception, has been prided on ideals of freedom, liberty, and equality. Throughout the nation’s span of a little less than two centuries, the true meaning of these words has been questioned and rightfully criticized. Only a few generations before King’s birth in 1929, slavery been legal in the South. Women had gained the right to vote only ten years prior. The very legality of the U.S.’s defining documents was under attack. If segregation was legal, how were the words, “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” be true? Rights were evident, but equal rights were not.

The country seemed to be falling apart at the seams, events piling on top of one another, too much responsibility to carry. Hypocrisy was eating it out from the inside, and the economical battle of Capitalism vs. Communism berated it from the outside. The government could not cave though, especially to the Soviet Union. Events of the Korean War, the Space Race, and the Vietnam War were evolving as the dominos began to fall. By the mid-60s, the United States was to face backlash no matter how they approached the case of Vietnam. The war had been raging for over a decade, and the matter of staying or pulling out was under constant debate. To pull out

and focus on internal issues of civil rights and poverty rates would potentially lead to communist globalization, the countries of NATO would be left abandoned by their big brother, and most importantly, the United States would be a sham hollowly claiming freedom for all. In contrast, to prolong the war would jeopardize the country as a whole. The draft was wildly hated by American citizens, the War on Poverty had been declared by President Johnson in 1964 as 19% of the country was impoverished. Adding on the other issues previously mentioned and the country was under an unimaginable amount of work of problems to solve.

Often when discussing the Civil Rights Movement, rarely are the other events mentioned as a historical reference. In the study of anything, especially ideologies and social reform, it is pertinent to understand the current climate and environment of the time. The Civil Rights Movement worked side by side with the events of Vietnam and the rest of the Cold War. The world seemed on the verge of collapse, and major action was needed in all parts of life to prevent it. Both were important in the solution: the creation of a new type of freedom and societal decency we strive to perfect even today.

The past years leading up to King's 1967 speech "Beyond Vietnam" was after major milestones in the fight against racial inequality. All forms of segregation had been banned in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had passed. In no way was the Civil Rights Movement over, but King felt he could start pioneering his goals to other parts of society, beyond racial rights, and into rebuilding the fundamentals of society. His first step outside the ring of the Civil Rights Movement was addressing Vietnam.

Out of the many speeches King has given, Vietnam was one of his longer ones, clocking in at about an hour of talking. However, none of the time was put to waste as MLK covered a vast array of topics and the underlying message, tying all of them together. It should also be

noted that this speech was given on April 4, 1967, exactly one year before King's assassination. We can only wonder how much farther the messages he conveyed could have been spread if he was given the time.

The opening of the oration addressed the heart of this essay and the common question King himself was asked. He reviewed them saying, "'Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King' [...] 'Peace and civil rights don't mix.'" It had become apparent to King that he was the face of the Civil Rights Movement, and although gratifying, he knew he had to break that assumption if he were to pursue other topics.

In continuation, King listed several reasons for speaking about the war. A big factor was his belief that addressing the war was his moral duty as a preacher and an American citizen. He established a firm belief that both Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement were moral issues at the core, so they were not very different from each other. Both appealed to the motto he helped choose for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, "To save the soul of America." Despite the different social impacts, the two events had, they were united in their cause to preserve and improve the country. King summarized this mentality preaching, "Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood." He addressed his speech to all Americans, and with firm rationale, explained his stance on the war.

King stated clearly his disdain for the war, labeling it as one of the issues plaguing the image of America. The main reason centered around the hypocrisy of the U.S. government in its justification for the war and its poor execution. The fact that men of color were drafted to fight for liberty and freedom that they did not receive themselves was illogical. Even many Caucasians were drafted against their will to fight for something they did not believe in. The country was founded on the backs and blood of men who believed in freedom. To now fight for a

war seen by a large portion of the population as unjust was the antithesis of what the United States stood for. Additionally, it was not just Americans who are affected, but also the Vietnamese. Vietnam had become independent in 1954 after fully separating itself from French and Japanese influences. The U.S. preached tolerance, but it pushed western philosophy and the western take of freedom onto Vietnam. Instead of embracing diversity and Vietnam's own culture, the U.S. supported France in its attempts of a second recolonization.

King expressed his disdain for the violence being committed by the American soldiers. He preached the immorality of the many innocent men, women, and children being killed by guns, bombs, water poisoning, and even starvation. In a grim analogy, he rhetorically asked how this makes us different from the Germans in WWII. "What do they think as we test out latest weapons on them, just as the Germans tested out new medicine and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe?" The words and actions of the U.S. contradicted themselves in every sense and to salvage such a broken reputation seemed grim.

King expressed this point in American history as one of its lowest. He questioned, "Is our nation planning to build on political myth again, and then shore it up upon the power of a new violence?" He explained the solution to Vietnam as peace and learning to love your enemy. Simple in concept, but the war was only a small part in remedying the country's soiled reputation, hence the title "Beyond Vietnam."

America was at the forefront, and it now must become an example for other countries to follow and emulate. The current state of the country was not up to par, and as King stated, "The world now demands a maturity of America that we may not be able to achieve." He explained the only way America can rework its image was to change. No longer could it be defiant against

its wrongdoings in Vietnam, nor could it continue life as it has been. American policy and life itself must change at the most fundamental levels. But how does a society remold itself?

Although not explicitly said, MLK believed that holding optimistic ideologies at the core of our actions was the best way to reconstruct society. By changing our morals to hold our values above materialism, justice and freedom would arise. America could undergo a revolution of values and pursue peace rather than war. A shining example of optimistic thinking is when he says, “We must not engage in negative anticommunism, but rather in a positive thrust for democracy.”

“Beyond Vietnam” was already the black sheep of MLK’s speeches in its content, but also in its tone and style. Being strongly pious, and addressing a similar crowd as well, often religious preaching and analogies were embedded in his talks. The sparse amount of Bible verses was most likely because of the change of demographic. Instead of being the deeply religious South, the speech was delivered in the more progressive New York City. Additionally, the impact of the speech was also minimal due to the strong anti-war mentality of the North. Martin Luther King’s speech about Vietnam did not travel far. Lost under the speeches he gave for the Civil Rights Movement. Outside the church where the speech was delivered Rev. King was heavily criticized by several African American organizations. In a New York Times article written the following day, Dr. Mathew of the National Economic Growth & Reconstruction Organization stated, “The patriotism of Negroes should never be questioned. Dr. King is not speaking for all Negroes.” The U.S. government was also discreetly annoyed by King’s speech, as it extended beyond his boundaries of civil rights. Due to his early demise, King was never able to further pursue the message he gave on that day. Beyond the Civil Rights Movement was a man who wanted to help people of all races, ages, and nationalities, a man with a vision and

aspiration to rebuild society into one filled with mutual understanding, compassion, and unconditional love. The memory of Martin Luther King Jr. was that of an American hero who fought for the rights of African Americans. He inspired every generation of new Americans with the idea of equality and justice for all. However, the man himself was much more complex than the polished image he was immortalized. He was a mortal man with flaws, but it was his optimism and his never-ending goal to pursue a better society, for people of all walks of life, that made him truly extraordinary. Martin Luther King's actions in the 1960s transcended beyond advocating for civil rights and into humanitarian rights and ethics during a time when all aspects of life and society were under scrutinous reevaluation, shaping the current mindset of the succeeding generations.

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