

Spelman, Morehouse, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Antiwar Movement

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Most American college students enter the classroom convinced that the Vietnam War deserves condemnation. They have learned of the war's folly not only from movies and television, but also from older relatives, who have likely told them the war was not merely senseless but shameful. A 1990 poll sponsored by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations revealed that seventy-one percent of the "general public" agreed that the Vietnam War "was more than a mistake; it was fundamentally wrong and immoral."¹ These sentiments have been passed to the students we now teach. They can seldom say *what* made the war "wrong and immoral," beyond the great toll it exacted in human life. Nevertheless, the majority of American students believe that the Vietnam War should never have happened, and nothing like it should happen again.

In my experience, however, the students' condemnation of the war does not mean they readily relate to the antiwar movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. Like most Americans, today's students conflate the antiwar movement and the counterculture movement. When they think of war protesters, they imagine draft-dodging, drug-addled flower children hurling feces at policeman while chanting, "Make love, not war!" Today's students—themselves no strangers to sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll—tend to regard such folks with amusement and no small derision. That's especially true of my students at Spelman, who show little patience for the complaints of spoiled rich kids from Berkeley or Yale—kids who were likely to die anywhere *but* the jungles of Vietnam while black men served and died in disproportionate numbers. As a teacher, it is tempting to pander to these stereotypes, to mock the protesters' excesses, to play the antiwar movement for comic relief. It's easy to get laughs describing the Yippies' 1967 attempt to levitate the Pentagon, or their 1968 nomination of a pig for president.²

But it is vital that we, as teachers of history, get students to take the antiwar movement seriously. It is important for the sake of historical understanding. Equating the peace movement with 1960s counterculture is ahistorical, and students should know that Americans from all walks of life opposed the war.³ It is also important because a serious discussion of the antiwar movement raises crucial questions that vex us today—questions about the health of American democracy, about the role of morality in our foreign policy, and about America's relationship with the rest of the world, especially those parts of the globe (like Southeast Asia) that seem remote and unconnected to our daily lives.

To help students grasp the relevance of the issues underlying antiwar activism, we must find ways to link them to the movement. The movement's student activists actually serve as a weak link, not only because their antics provoke

titters among our students, but also because today's students too readily see the differences between themselves and 1960s radicals—differences of class, of race and of values. (That is especially true if you teach at a public institution or at an HBCU [Historically Black Colleges and Universities].) There was, however, an individual in the antiwar movement who will grab the students' attention every time: Martin Luther King, Jr. Students of all backgrounds continue to find King a compelling figure. He may not be universally admired, but he is endlessly fascinating. Even more important, for our purposes here, King's opposition to the Vietnam War—which has largely disappeared from public memory—centered on issues that concern Americans today.⁴

That is why I introduce the antiwar movement by asking students to read King's famous speech, "Beyond Vietnam."⁵ Delivered in New York's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967—one year to the day before his assassination—the speech is pyrotechnic. It brims with prophetic anger and righteous passion. It jars our complacency, and it forces us to grapple with the moral urgency of the issues surrounding the War. As Vincent Harding, formerly of the Spelman history department, has put it: "The speech not only requires us to struggle once more with the meaning of King, 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)."⁶ Like nothing else, King's speech invites students into the debate over Vietnam. In doing so, it encourages them not only to learn more about Vietnam the war, but also about Vietnam the country.

Before discussing the content of King's speech, I should mention that King's close ties to Morehouse and Spelman make "Beyond Vietnam" an especially effective assignment for my students at the Atlanta University Center. On the campuses of Morehouse and Spelman, students literally walk in King's footsteps. King's father was a graduate of Morehouse, his mother a graduate of Spelman. King himself entered Morehouse in 1944 at the age of fifteen, taking his bachelor's degree in 1948. During the 1960s, King both worked and argued with the students of Spelman and Morehouse as they struggled together for civil rights. At the Atlanta sit-ins of 1960, King was arrested alongside Spelman women. As the 1960s wore on, tensions arose between King and the students of Morehouse and Spelman, especially those who belonged to the Atlanta-based Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organization that eventually embraced black nationalism. But King's ties to Spelman and Morehouse never broke. His memorial service in April 1968 took place on the Spelman campus in Sisters Chapel, where Spelman women still gather for annual ceremonies such as Founders' Day.⁷

On the question of Vietnam, students at Morehouse and Spelman actually ranged ahead of King. In 1965 and 1966, as President Lyndon Johnson escalated the war, King said little. Twice he called on LBJ to halt the bombing of North Vietnam and to open negotiations with the National Liberation Front. But in general he was reluctant to criticize

the war. He feared antiwar activism would distract from his campaign for economic justice in Chicago, and he worried about alienating President Johnson, a valuable ally to the civil rights movement. The students of Morehouse and Spelman harbored no such reservations. Those who belonged to SNCC joined with New Left organizations such as the Students for a Democratic Society to participate in the first significant demonstration against the war at the Washington Monument in April 1965. In February 1966, students and faculty at the Atlanta University Center organized an event called Speakout on Vietnam, which encouraged debate over the war. Students also aired their opposition to the war in the student newspapers, the *Spelman Spotlight* and the *Morehouse Tiger*. The students' activism did not escape King's notice and may even have spurred him to action. In "Beyond Vietnam," he spoke proudly of the more than 70 Morehouse students who had chosen the "alternative of conscientious objection," and he recommended that anyone who opposed the war should follow their lead.⁸

As the antiwar movement burgeoned on the campuses of Morehouse and Spelman, King suffered pangs of conscience that eventually moved him to speak out. His longstanding commitment to nonviolence, along with his acceptance of the Nobel Prize in 1964, made him feel dutiful to speak out. King began to see his silence on Vietnam as a betrayal of himself and of the American people. As he later wrote, "Had I not, again and again, said that the silent onlooker must bear the responsibility for the brutalities committed by the Bull Connors, or by the murderers of the innocent children in a Birmingham church? Had I not committed myself to the principle that looking away from evil is, in effect, a condoning of it?" The crucial turning point for King came in January 1967, when he read an illustrated article called "The Children of Vietnam" in *Ramparts* magazine. Photographs depicting napalm burns suffered by Vietnamese children staggered King and moved him to act.⁹

King broke his silence the following April in the masterful address, "Beyond Vietnam," an event sponsored by Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam. The speech was King's definitive statement on the war, and in it he articulated themes he would revisit throughout the last year of his life. The speech derived its power not only from its language and its passion, but also from its structure. King began with the war's impact at home, moved to its impact on Vietnam, and ended with its impact on the world. In stages, King moved from a local to a global perspective. He led his audience, in other words, from the familiar to the unfamiliar—which is why the speech remains such a powerful tool in our effort to teach about the war today.

In "Beyond Vietnam," King outlined five main reasons for opposing the war. I will take them in order, moving from the local to the global, from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

First, the war imperiled the anti-poverty programs of the Great Society. By 1967, King believed racial justice was impossible without economic justice. He held out high hopes for President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. But the war in Vietnam, said King, was an "enemy of the poor,"

siphoning money and energy from the Great Society, "like some demonic destructive suction tube." "It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor—both black and white—through the poverty program," he said. "Then came the buildup 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."

Second, the war devastated not only the hopes but also the lives of the American poor. The government's policy of granting deferments to students in college or graduate school meant that minorities, the poor and the working classes bore a disproportionate burden in the war.¹⁰ King, along with other Americans, found this appalling. "We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society," he said, "and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem." King also pointed out the irony of seeing blacks and whites "kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools." King's focus was once again on the damage the war inflicted on social justice at home.

Third, and here King began to connect the American and Vietnamese people, King argued that the war promoted violence at home and abroad. King believed there was a direct connection between the violence that shattered Vietnam and the violence that sundered American cities in the last half of the 1960s. He sharply criticized the U.S. government for underwriting this violence. His analysis is worth quoting at length:

As I have walked among the desperate, rejected and angry young men I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems But they asked—and rightly so—what about Vietnam? They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government.

King added that such violence not only poisoned America's soul, but also destroyed the "deepest hopes of men the world over."

Fourth, shifting his focus to Vietnam itself, King asserted the war brutalized and victimized the Vietnamese people. Observing that the Vietnamese "must see Americans as strange liberators," King castigated the government's support of the corrupt Diem regime, and he wondered why the Johnson administration pursued a war that undermined rather than supported Vietnamese independence. He made clear that he did not see Ho Chi Minh or the Nationalist Liberation Front as "paragons of virtue." But, said King, the war against Ho Chi Minh and his supporters did much more harm than good. It savaged the Vietnamese peasantry,

wrecking villages and families, corrupting women and children, killing men. “The peasants may well wonder if we plan to build our new Vietnam on such grounds as these?” he said. “Could we blame them for such thoughts? We must speak for them and raise the questions they cannot raise. These too are our brothers.” In seeking to “give a voice to the voiceless,” as he put it, King was truly radical. He not only accused the Johnson administration of hypocrisy—of pursuing a new brand of colonialism in the name of democracy—but he also asked victims of oppression in America to recognize the interests they shared in common with the Vietnamese people—and against their own government. His seemingly innocuous statement—“These too are our brothers”—called on listeners to reject the demands of nationalism and become a “citizen of the world.”

Finally, building on his preceding point, King argued that the Vietnam War put America on the wrong side of the coming world “revolution in values.” Here, King was truly prophetic. He saw American involvement in Vietnam as “but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit.” He predicted, with startling accuracy, that without “a significant and profound change in American life and policy,” Americans would find themselves concerned about other Vietnams—in Guatemala and Peru, Thailand and Cambodia, Mozambique and South Africa. But King held out hope. He believed Americans could still take the lead in a world “revolution of values” if only they supported those who were “revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression.” Americans must, said King, declare “eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism.” The war in Vietnam delayed the “revolution of values” by abetting hate and violence, by arousing resentment abroad, by promoting national interests above the interests of all humankind. By withdrawing from Vietnam, King suggested, Americans would lay the foundation of a dazzling new world, one unencumbered by nationalism, one united by justice and love.

King’s speech does not win universal acclaim from today’s students, just as it failed to draw much praise at all when he delivered it. King drew heavy criticism from editorialists and policymakers, who considered his criticism of the government dangerously radical. He also took heat from his friends in the civil rights movement, who thought the speech undermined the struggle for racial equality. Today, many college students find King’s idealism off-putting. They are much too cynical to dream of a world based on justice and love.

Still, King’s “Beyond Vietnam” is generally a smash hit among students, and it has proven valuable in the classroom in three ways. First, it draws attention to the surging radicalism of King’s later years—a militancy that makes King, to quote Vincent Harding once again, an “inconvenient hero.” Nowadays, most Americans, including most students, tend to see King as a moderate. That is especially true on the campuses of HBCUs, where students tend to view King through the lens of the Black Power movement. “Beyond Vietnam” helps students to arrive at a more accurate understanding of the dynamic nature of King’s protest thought.

Second, King’s speech excites students’ curiosity about Vietnam, the war. It raises questions about the war’s impact on the Great Society, on the civil rights movement, on the poor and the working classes. It raises questions about the actions and methods of American armed forces in Vietnam. And it raises vital questions about America’s motivations, commitments and goals in pursuing the war. In short, it causes students to take the antiwar movement seriously, and it encourages them to stop and think about why so many Americans now regard Vietnam with such shame. They are forced at last to engage the profound issues that underlie the War.

Finally, King’s speech excites students’ curiosity about Vietnam the country. King wanted his listeners to view the war through the eyes of the Vietnamese people, and I found that my students at Spelman, at least, were willing to accept his invitation. King’s speech provoked all sorts of questions about Vietnam: What did South Vietnamese peasants think of Ho Chi Minh? What did they think of Americans? What was the role of the village and the family in peasant life? How do the Vietnamese people remember the war? Many of these questions I could not answer. But it was thrilling to see how many questions the assignment managed to spark.

Ultimately, the curiosity that King’s “Beyond Vietnam” aroused in my students at Spelman—curiosity about a man, a war and a country—confirmed its value as an assignment. Exciting students’ curiosity must be one of our central tasks as teachers. Curiosity ensures that learning will continue beyond the confines of the classroom. But curiosity also opens up the moral dimensions of history by drawing students out of themselves and forcing them to see the world from another point of view. I will close with a quote that captures my thoughts on this score. It comes from Graham Swift’s superb novel, *Waterland*. Says the main character, an old history teacher:

Children, be curious. Nothing is worse (I know it) than when curiosity stops. Nothing is more repressive than the repression of curiosity. Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world. It’s part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit. People die when curiosity goes. People have to find out, people have to know. How can there be any true revolution till we know what we’re made of?¹¹

NOTES

¹Alexander Cockburn, *The Nation*, October 12, 1992.

²See Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as Novel, the Novel as History* (New York, 1968); Norman Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago: An Informal History of the Republican and Democratic Conventions of 1968* (New York, 1968); James Miller, “*Democracy is in the Streets*”: *From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge, MA, 1994); and Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York, 1993).

³Historians have not been so blind to the diversity of the antiwar coalition, and numerous works describe its complexities. See Thomas Powers, *The War at Home: Vietnam and the American People* (New York, 1973); Charles Debenedetti, et. al., *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam War* (Syracuse, 1990); David W. Levey, *The Debate Over Vietnam* (Baltimore, 1991); Tom Wells and Todd Gitlin, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (Berkeley, 1994); and Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York, 1996).

⁴Discussions of King's antiwar activism may be found in Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound* (New York, 1982); David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1988); Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY, 1996); and William M. King, "The Reemerging Revolutionary Consciousness of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1965-1968," *Journal of Negro History* (Winter-Autumn, 1986), 1-22.

⁵The full text of King's speech appeared in the *New York Times*, April 5, 1967. It has been reprinted in James M. Washington, Jr., ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings*

and *Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1986), 231-244. An edited version appears in Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1998), 333-345, and in Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism* (Boston, 1996), 208-212. The full text may also be found on the web site of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project (http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/speeches/Beyond_Vietnam.htm)

⁶Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero*, 69.

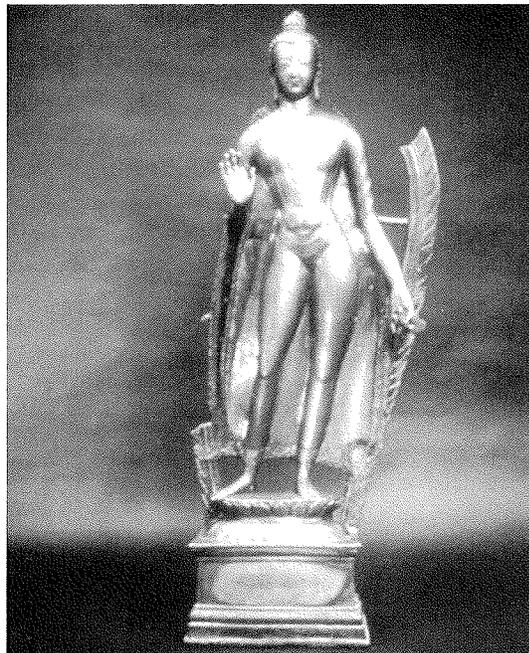
⁷Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Year, 1954-1963* (New York, 1988), 286. On SNCC, see Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston, 1964), and Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA, 1981).

⁸Carson, *In Struggle*, 183-189; "Speakout Vietnam," *The Spelman Spotlight* (March 1966), 3.

⁹Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 336; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 543.

¹⁰James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1971* (New York, 1996), 631-633.

¹¹Graham Swift, *Waterland* (New York, 1983), 155.



Standing Buddha
Kashmir, ca. 10th century
Brass
The Cleveland Museum of Art