

# Remembering Dr. Martin Luther King 2018

January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968

*The ultimate weakness of violence  
is that it is a descending spiral,  
begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.  
Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.  
Through violence you may murder the liar,  
but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth.  
Through violence you murder the hater,  
but you do not murder hate.  
In fact, violence merely increases hate....  
Returning violence for violence multiplies violence,  
adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.  
Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.  
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*

**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

I am moved to write this essay in acknowledgment of Dr. Martin Luther King's significance for America and the world as a follower and advocate for Dr. King's point of view more from the shadows than from the frontline.

I was a college student from a conservative all-'white' Indiana town during his active years and a young gay man trying to figure out my own place in society and the degree to which I could afford to risk attracting undue attention to myself.

Attending Manchester College, a college with one of the first Peace Studies programs in the US, impacted my view of much of what I learned. I interacted with Africans whom the Church of the Brethren, a Historic Peace Church, brought from their Nigerian sister church (known in their local language as the Church of the Children of the Same Father!) as well as Central and South American Peace Studies majors sponsored by the church. I initiated conversations through the student government (which had not born fruit when I graduated) to offer an exchange semester with Rust College, one of the 'HBCUs' (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) as a means of exposing Midwesterners from Northern Europe to the realities of the U.S. South and the lives of the descendants of slaves. My own excursions into the South and later studies in Dallas, TX, heightened my own awareness, without moving me to direct action.

During my doctoral studies in Evanston I was exposed to Dr. Walter Muelder, retired Dean of Boston University School of Theology, one of Dr. King's professors in non-violent social change, as well as to a reading program in Black History and Theology.

However, my most direct encounter with Dr. King was at the Methodist Student Movement (MSM) Quadrennial Conference in Lincoln, NE, in 1966, where he and other civil rights leaders spoke to roughly 1,000 Methodist students.

Today I am keenly aware that it cannot be left to the persons most directly disadvantaged by discrimination, deprivation and policies permitting and supporting racist ideologies to correct these discriminatory and oppressive features of our society. Those who enjoy privilege must be willing to risk that privilege in order to bring equality to those without such privilege and influence. On the other hand it behooves those of us with relatively more power and privilege

and a modicum of insight into the plight of the less powerful to look to minority leadership from various perspectives for guidance and to offer our affirmation and support while avoiding the temptation to usurp leadership in common efforts.

In the midst of preparing the essay I watched the first in David Letterman's new series "My Next Guest," which focused on an interview of sorts and much banter between himself and former President Barack Obama discussing race and leadership, and including segments of Letterman's interaction with Congressman John Lewis on and about the Edmund Pettus Bridge, site of the 1995 Bloody Sunday police brutality against voting rights marchers outside Selma, Alabama. Both Obama and Letterman reflected on the extreme courage of John Lewis as he was beaten nearly to death, and which continued through years of protests and more than 50 arrests. Both the President and the talk show host opined at how lucky they were to have been given the roles they played without the hardships which people like Lewis had had to face to be advocates for equal rights for all citizens in the face of police brutality and the articulate advocacy and finally honed leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., and others.

I will now move into some direct citations of Dr. King's thought and leadership, without any claim that my list is complete or appropriately weighted.

Dr. King claimed the US's foundational documents as normative, even as he acknowledged that the United States had never lived up to them, especially as regards the Black man. (Dr. King's generation had not yet gotten the memo about gender inclusive language — he almost always used "man" in the generic sense when not referring to specific persons of known gender.) The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, he said, served as a "promissory note" upon which America had defaulted (and still is defaulting). The African-American community had been given a bad check which bounced upon presentation for payment.

I would like to start at the speech which is perhaps the epitome of his message, but which may be the most ignored because of its specificity to the Vietnamese War, when it might properly be applied to all U.S.-led wars in general, and the increasing controversy which followed it.

Riverside Church speech, April; 4, 1967

It was almost 51 years ago in April 1967 when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke out against American foreign policy at the Riverside Church in NYC. Exactly one year later, on April 4, 1968, he was assassinated.

As in so many incidents, mourning of his death and deep disappointment over what his death meant for the Civil Rights Movement allowed the fundamental critique of the Riverside speech to appear to be ignored or suppressed as the world continued on its downward course of violence and militarism.

Militarism as such was perhaps first brought to our consciousness in my generation by Ike's (President and former General Dwight David Eisenhower's) warning against the "military-industrial complex" (MIC) in his farewell address on January 17, 1961, 57 years ago <see [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/eisenhower001.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/eisenhower001.asp)> and 6 years prior to King's Riverside Church speech. (The term is sometimes expanded to MICC — "military-industrial-congressional complex"— to acknowledge Congress' complicit role in seeking military contracts to provide economic benefits at national taxpayers' expense to local munitions or other factories without regard for the effect upon the global arms race and world peace.

In that speech Dr. King drew the red thread between vast investments of money, materiel and lives in foreign adventures which brought good only to those who dealt in manufacture and sale of weapons, and which more clearly provide a basis for lasting animosity than for peace.

While these resources were thus being squandered, money was lacking to meet basic needs especially of the disadvantaged poor and undereducated in the U.S.A., most especially descendants of slaves deprived of capital and robbed of the fruits of their labor, The injustice of war may have been obvious when the military draft pulled in males from all groups in society, but after the discontinuance of inscription under the draft laws which still exist, those sent off to battle were to a disproportionately high degree African-Americans, the poor, or newly arrived immigrants who were often promised citizenship for service. The cost to the average citizen was lost, except when cuts were made to social programs to feed the military machine. (A recent statistic featured on a billboard in Maryland asserts that “3% of U.S. military spending could end starvation on earth,” based on figures supplied by the United Nations. See <<http://worldbeyondwar.org/billboards-bases-baltimore-2/>>.)

While Dr. King had been reticent to alienate allies he had won for his anti-discrimination, civil rights and voting rights efforts, the Riverside Church speech was perhaps his clearest statement that civil rights implies human rights and that anyone supporting equal rights for all people would logically need to extend that concept to include resisting going to war in violation of the human rights of other peoples in other countries.

The April 1967 speech was just one speech in a long series slowly moving in the same direction — one held on a prominent stage in a prominent city. It was preceded by many other significant steps, e.g., the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

The Riverside Church speech was followed by a Spring Mobilization speech in a rally outside the United Nations ten days later on April 15, 1967. His words spoken there illustrate his increasing efforts to identify root causes rather than symptoms of the situation.

The 1968 Poor People’s March which ended in a 100-day encampment of poor people on the National Mall weeks following his death.

“I have not urged a mechanical fusion of the civil rights and peace movements. There are people who have come to see the moral imperative of equality, but who cannot yet see the moral imperative of world brotherhood. I would like to see the fervor of the civil-rights movement imbued into the peace movement to instill it with greater strength. And I believe everyone has a duty to be in both the civil-rights and peace movements. But for those who presently choose but one, I would hope they will finally come to see the moral roots common to both.”

On January 13, 1968, a day after Johnson’s State of the Union address he spoke words which might well be applied to our political landscape in 2018:

“We need to make clear in this political year, to congressmen [and -women] on both sides of the aisle and to the President of the United States, that we will no longer tolerate, we will no longer vote for, men who continue to see the killings of Vietnamese and Americans [update the list as you will: Iraqis, Palestines, people of Yemen, Haitians, Salvadorans ... ] as the best way of advancing the goals of freedom and self-determination in Southeast Asia [and the world].

#### 1968 Poor People’s Campaign

The campaign was preceded by King's final book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* which laid out his view of how to address social issues and poverty. King quoted from Henry George and George's book, *Progress and Poverty*, particularly in support of a guaranteed basic income. The campaign culminated in a march on Washington, D.C., demanding economic aid to the poorest communities of the United States.

Thousands of demonstrators arrived on the National Mall and established a camp they called "Resurrection City." beginning six weeks after Dr. King's death. They stayed for another six weeks.

On June 5, activist Bayard Rustin published in the New York Times his draft of an "Economic Bill of Rights," based on Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1944 draft which was also adapted by the committee of 100 of the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) as part of an effort to convince the middle class and labor groups to support the action.

Rustin's draft suggested that the federal government should:[97]

- 1       Recommit to the Full Employment Act of 1946 and legislate the immediate creation of at least one million socially useful career jobs in public service;
- 2       Adopt the pending Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968;
- 3       Repeal the 90th Congress's punitive welfare restrictions in the 1967 Amendments to Social Security;
- 4       Extend to all farm workers the right—guaranteed under the National Labor Relations Act - to organize agricultural labor unions;
- 5       Restore budget cuts for bilingual education, Head Start, summer jobs, Economic Opportunity Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Acts.

It is important to note that, aside from the emphasis on civil rights which we reflexively celebrate every year in memory of King's life, King was also on the leading edge of thinking for an end to militarism, a guaranteed income and acknowledgment that poverty is a systemic issue, not some for which individuals are in general directly responsible, as opposed to a prominent school of British and American thinking..

His death ended the focus on these issues and their connectedness for many. It behooves us to seek to recover the interconnectedness and to remember, as both King asserted and major religions teach, that injustice to one is injustice to all.

**“A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true.”**

King speeches and further resources online:

Downloadable text of the Riverside Church speech: <[http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/Beyond\\_Vietnam.pdf](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/Beyond_Vietnam.pdf)>

Video recording King's speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize 1964: <<https://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=1853>>

An NPR archive of speeches of Dr. King and commentary thereon: <<https://www.npr.org/news/specials/march40th/speeches.html>>

Martin Luther King Junior and the Global Freedom Struggle: <[http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc\\_beyond\\_vietnam\\_4\\_april\\_1967.1.html](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_beyond_vietnam_4_april_1967.1.html)>