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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr: Opposing the Vietnam War amidst Civil Rights Campaigns and Urban Rebellions

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After the famous Riverside Church address by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1967 in New York City where a position against the Vietnam War was spelled out, he visited Stanford University ten days later to make another profound statement indicating clearly his direction in the emerging phase of the African American political movement.

Just in the previous summer of 1966, Dr. King had joined the Chicago Freedom Movement in an effort to bring the mass Civil Rights campaigns of the South to the northern industrial and commercial centers. In the midst of putting forth demands related to quality housing, full employment and the indifference of the city government led by Mayor Richard Daley, a rebellion erupted for four straight days on the west side.

Two people died in the unrest and millions in property damage was done by outraged African Americans reflecting the growing militancy and impatience towards the white ruling class in the metropolitan areas and the federal government in Washington, D.C. Thousands of National Guard troops were deployed to the streets of Chicago while the Daley administration blamed Dr. King and the Freedom Movement for the unrest.

It was during the Chicago Freedom Movement actions in 1966 that the term “white backlash” came to the fore. Whites violently opposed marches for open housing through several Chicago neighborhoods occupied by European-Americans. On several occasions whites came out of their homes carrying swastikas and hurling stones at the multi-racial demonstrators.

The events of 1966 in Chicago illustrated clearly that racism and national oppression was just as intransigent in the North as in the South, if not more so due to the de facto segregationist character of the urban areas. The SCLC leader emphasized that unless a peaceful revolution was possible in the United States, a violent revolution was inevitable.

Beginning in 1967, Dr. King explained methodically how the character of the movement for emancipation had to shift to eradicating the underlying social and economic character of the American political system. It was not enough to take down the legal barriers to full participation in society if there is not a radical economic redistribution of concentrated wealth among the exclusively white ruling class.

At Stanford on April 14, 1967, he noted: “Many things were gained as a result of these years of struggle. In 1964 the Civil Rights Bill came into being after the Birmingham movement which did a great deal to subpoena the conscience of a large segment of the nation to

appear before the judgment seat of morality on the whole question of Civil Rights. After the Selma movement in 1965 we were able to get a Voting Rights Bill. And all of these things represented strides." (http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article32068.htm)

He later continued emphasizing:

> "[W]e must see that the struggle today is much more difficult. It's more difficult today because we are struggling now for genuine equality. It's much easier to integrate a lunch counter than it is to guarantee a livable income and a good solid job. It's much easier to guarantee the right to vote than it is to guarantee the right to live in sanitary, decent housing conditions. It is much easier to integrate a public park than it is to make genuine, quality, integrated education a reality. And so today we are struggling for something which says we demand genuine equality."

Vietnam Opposition Taken to the United Nations and Beyond

The day following his Stanford speech, Dr. King traveled to New York City to lead a demonstration from Central Park to the UN demanding an end to the U.S. imperialist war in Vietnam. A feeder march began in Harlem which later merged with the broader manifestation.

As early as January 1966, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had taken a clear line in opposition to the Vietnam War and the draft. Dr. King had been under pressure from a younger generation of activists to throw his weight behind the antiwar movement.

The UN demonstration was called for in November 1966 by the Spring Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam where estimates say that 125,000 people were in attendance. A similar march was held in San Francisco attracting 60,000 people.

At the UN, Dr. King, Stokely Carmichael, James Bevel and Floyd McKissick all spoke alongside Dr. Benjamin Spock and other peace advocates indicating the convergence of forces from the Civil Rights Movement and the antiwar struggle. In San Francisco, African Americans played an important role in the demonstration. The April 15 mobilizations came after a full week of antiwar activities on campuses across the U.S.

Later a "Vietnam Summer" was organized which gained the endorsements of Drs. King and Spock. The idea was credited to Gar Alperovitz, a fellow at the Kennedy School's Institute of Politics. Volunteer youth were recruited to go throughout neighborhoods to build political consensus against the War. Another demonstration was called on the Pentagon right outside Washington D.C. on October 21. Tens of thousands rallied and marched as well as several hundred who burned draft cards making a direct challenge to the selective service system.

Moreover, SNCC had embarked upon efforts to organize the African American community into a viable force in opposition to the War. Gwen Patton of SNCC would cofound the National Black Antiwar and Anti-Draft Union (NBAWADU) in 1968. Her efforts would later include leadership of the National Association of Black Students (NABS) in 1969, which was influenced by former SNCC official James Forman, who at the time was in Detroit working with the newly-formed League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) and the Black Manifesto of the National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC), a document

drafted by Forman demanding $500 million in reparations for African people from the white religious community.

A broad antiwar sentiment was reflective of the resistance to the draft by heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, a member of the Nation of Islam (NOI). Dr. King supported Ali in his fight to gain recognition for his religious objection to the war in Vietnam.

Urban Rebellions: The High Tide of Black Resistance

1967 was the apex of urban rebellions which had struck cities at an increasing rate for the past four springs and summers. Over 160 outbreaks occurred between January and September from Atlanta, Tampa, Cincinnati and Newark to Detroit and Milwaukee. The rebellions were intensifying in their political character with attacks on private property, police and fireman.

The-then President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed the country over nationwide television on July 24 in response to the appeal by Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh of Detroit and Governor George Romney in Lansing to send federal troops into the city since the situation was beyond their capacity to contain and control. Johnson announced the landing of 5,000 troops in the city from the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. They were dispatched to augment the already existing 8,000 National Guard and thousands more local and state police officers.

Three days later Johnson announced the empaneling of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, popularly named after its chair, Illinois Governor Otto Kerner. He had denounced the rebellions as lawlessness which must be halted immediately.

The Kerner Commission issued a report on March 1, 1968 documenting in part the developments in Detroit and other cities saying:

> "The 'typical' riot did not take place. The disorders of 1967 were unusual, irregular, complex and unpredictable social processes. Like most human events, they did not unfold in an orderly sequence. However, an analysis of our survey information leads to some conclusions about the riot process. In general the civil disorders of 1967 involved Negroes (African Americans) acting against local symbols of white American society, authority and property in Negro neighborhoods–rather than against white persons. Of 164 disorders reported during the first nine months of 1967, eight (5 percent) were major in terms of violence and damage; 33 (20 percent) were serious but not major; 123 (75 percent) were minor and undoubtedly would not have received national attention as "riots" had the nation not been sensitized by the more serious outbreaks." (Taken from Chapter 2 on the Patterns of Disorder)

This section goes on stressing that:

> "In the 75 disorders studied by a Senate subcommittee, 83 deaths were reported. Eighty-two percent of the deaths and more than half the injuries occurred in Newark and Detroit. About 10 percent of the dead and 38 percent of the injured were public employees, primarily law officers and firemen. The overwhelming majority of the persons killed or injured in all the disorders were Negro civilians. Initial damage estimates were greatly exaggerated. In Detroit, newspaper damage estimates at first ranged from $200 million to $500 million; the highest recent estimate is $45 million. In Newark, early estimates ranged

> from $15 to $25 million. A month later damage was estimated at $10.2 million, over 80 percent in inventory losses."

Events from 1965 to 1967 had placed the SCLC's commitment to nonviolent struggle on the defensive. Although Dr. King maintained his commitment to this form of protest, he did not condemn those engaged in the rebellions saying that "riots were the voice of the unheard."

By the conclusion of the summer Dr. King would deepen his analysis of the present situation in light of the burgeoning unrest. James Forman, who at the time (1967) served as International Affairs Director for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which had taken a position against the War in Vietnam an entire year prior to Dr. King, analyzed the situation in an essay entitled "High Tide of Black Resistance."

Forman wrote of the period illustrating:

> "The year 1967 marked a historic milestone in the struggle for the liberation of black people in the United States and the year that revolutionaries throughout the world began to understand more fully the impact of the black movement. Our liberation will only come when there is final destruction of this mad octopus-the capitalistic system of the United States with all its life-sucking tentacles of exploitation and racism that choke the people of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. To work, to fight, and to die for the liberation of our people in the United States means, therefore, to work for the liberation of all oppressed people around the world. Liberation movements in many parts of the world are now aware that, when they begin to fight colonialism, it becomes imperative that we in this country try to neutralize the possibilities of full-scale United States intervention as occurred in Santa Domingo, as is occurring in Vietnam, and as may occur in Haiti, Venezuela, South Africa or wherever. While such a task may well be beyond our capacity, an aroused, motivated, and rebelling black American population nevertheless helps in our indivisible struggles against racism, colonialism, and apartheid."

Dr. King would take these sentiments into consideration as he articulated his new vision at the National Conference for a New Politics in Chicago during Labor Day weekend in 1967 along with a series of talks delivered over the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the Massey Lectures of November and December. These ideas will be examined in a later report and their implications for the interventions into Memphis sanitation workers strike and the Poor People's Campaign of early 1968.

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