GlobalResearch
Center for Research on Globalization

MLK's Political Evolution Through the 1960s

By Robert Barsocchini
Global Research, January 16, 2018
Washington's Blog 15 January 2018

Region: USA
Theme: History, Media Disinformation, Police State & Civil Rights

Maybe we just have to admit that the day of violence is here, and maybe we just have to give up and let violence take its course. The nation won't listen to our voice – maybe it'll heed the voice of violence. – ***Martin Luther King,*** *Jr., 1968 (1)*

In "Martin Luther King Jr. and the Cold War", **Thomas Noer** describes how and why King's outlook evolved during the 1960s. Towards the beginning of the decade, King "tended to separate domestic issues from foreign affairs". He maintained a decidedly anti-Communist stance and refrained from expressing dissenting views on foreign policy, fearing that he would alienate supporters of desegregation. But as he began visiting African countries, he started to see Civil Rights for African Americans as part of an anti-colonial struggle against white supremacy. He praised **Kwame Nkrumah** as an inspiration and condemned the US for supporting the "tyranny" of South African apartheid. He noted the US could use its surplus food to prevent people around the world from starving to death, but it lacked the desire to do so. Whereas earlier he expressed that the US should win the Cold War, now he began praising Cold War neutralism.

By 1965, King had made selected and limited criticisms of aspects of US foreign policy, but with the violence of the war increasing, King began to feel a need to comment and intervene. Advisors cautioned him against engaging the issue, as "polls showed that a majority of both black and white Americans supported the war". Nevertheless, King made a speech calling for negotiations between the US and North Vietnam, and called for a halt to US bombing.

King was stunned by the ferocity of the reaction to his speech. He did not want to abandon his stance, but he did pause from speaking on the matter. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) joined King in his criticism of the war, but he was attacked by the *New York Times*, **Lyndon Johnson**, and many others.

A 1966 trip to Chicago was crucial in the continued evolution of King's political analysis and his decision to continue to integrate foreign policy into his commentary. He saw the extent of antiwar sentiment in urban ghettos and became aware that US aggression in Indochina was "not an aberration" but "an extension of deeply ingrained American values." He found that while middle class blacks supported the war, poor blacks "strongly opposed any US involvement" in Indochina.

King was shocked by the virulence of racism in the North. He "claimed never to have experienced the racial hatred in Mississippi or Alabama that he encountered in Chicago", and found that "many white supporters abandoned him" when he shifted his focus from Southern to Northern racism. "Chicago taught him that racism was far more deeply

ingrained and widespread." King now believed "most Americans are unconscious racists." He found in the North an "intractable opposition to racial equality."

He also began to connect racism and economics, finding that Northern whites had an economic stake in maintaining black ghettos, which he said were, like poverty in India and Africa, examples of "white colonialis[t]" profiteering. Ghettos were "domestic colon[ies]". Whereas his earlier criticism of US aggression in Vietnam was largely based on American violence, he now began placing the war "within a larger framework": it was, he said, a colonialist venture driven by economics and racism. He said the war was "not a tactical blunder or the product of a few malevolent individuals, but instead a symbol of America's misguided values of materialism and racism that maintained the ghettos at home" and sought "white colonialism" abroad.

King gave major speech in April 1967 called "A Time to Break Silence". Whereas earlier he had called for negotiations between the US and North Vietnam, now he pointed out that South Vietnam did not want US intervention. He "rejected" the claim that the US had "good intentions", asserting its intentions were in reality dishonorable; that the US wanted to make Vietnam into a profitable "American colony"; that it considered profits "more important than people." He said this attitude generalized for US policy towards "Asia, Africa, and South America", and US policy would not change until it abandoned "materialism and racism", which would require a total restructuring of society. He called on the US to "recognize the National Liberation Front [Vietcong] as a legitimate choice of the Vietnamese people".

The reaction to the speech was "largely negative." Groups and leaders including the NAACP and **Jackie Robinson** "dissociated" from King. *WaPo* and *NYT* condemned the speech. *Life* used nationalist othering of King to manipulate readers emotionally, as did Johnson and Hoover. Johnson requested that an African American former US government propaganda director write an op-ed attacking King. The result, published in *Reader's Digest*, expressed the idea that African Americans must demonstrate loyalty by supporting US aggression in Vietnam (and presumably elsewhere), and utilized nationalist othering to manipulate reader psychology.

King was discouraged but "did not retreat" as he had in 1965. Instead, he invited black power movement and SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael to Sunday services in Atlanta. In a sermon, King defended his position on Vietnam, noting that while his stance was neither expedient nor popular, he had to take it because his conscience told him it was right. In his final speech, he said there was a global revolution occurring against white supremacy; that people from North to South Africa, from New York to Tennessee, were yearning to be free. He was assassinated the next day, on April 4, 1968.

*

Robert J. Barsocchini *is a graduate student in American Studies. Years working as a cross-cultural intermediary for corporations in the film and Television industry sparked his interest in the discrepancy between Western self-image and reality.*

Note

(1) Quoted in Rhodes, Joel P. *The Voice of Violence: Performative Violence as Protest in the Vietnam Era*. Praeger. 2001. 1. Rhodes notes the nation did not listen to the "voice of violence", but rather interpreted it however it wanted, regardless of the clarity of the messaging. The virtually uniform

interpretation was from an in-group/0ut-group nationalist mentality that imagined the violence was being perpetrated by “outsiders” with no real grievances who were simply trying to create chaos and possibly overthrow the country.

Articles by: **Robert Barsocchini**