

# Saving the Soul of America: The Eisenhower, Jefferson, King Debate

By [Wally Myers](#)

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*This play by Wally Myers will debut on September 16th in Charlottesville, Va., as part of [a conference marking 50 years of the Military Industrial Complex](#). It can be performed by any group that finds it valuable.*



## Host:

Ladies and gentlemen, citizens and guests, welcome. Recent polls show that two out of three Americans think that our government is going in the wrong direction. Many of us feel confused and conflicted, not knowing what or who to believe. Surrounded by a fog of deceit we long for some beacon of clarity. We feel the storms of war thundering before us, blowing away our rights with the gale winds of fear, and burning down the edifice of our morality with the lightening fires of hate. Yet this human tragedy is as old as war itself; but fought now with weapons newly spawned in the laboratories of devastation.

America must come to realize that the fog of lies and the storms of war are our own creation – our creation of our own destruction. And they have a history. They have a direction. They have a conclusion. To find the clarity to guide us in a different direction we recall the past so as not to repeat its deadly conclusion. We evoke the past to foresee the future; ever mindful that it is we who choose the direction and bring it into being and nurture it.

Tonight we evoke three leaders who have shaped our history.

And now, please welcome Dwight David Eisenhower, the Commander of the Allied military forces in World War II Europe and the President who stopped the war in Korea.

Please welcome the sage of Monticello Thomas Jefferson the author of The Declaration of Independence, Governor of Virginia, Ambassador to France, founder of the University of Virginia, and our 3rd President.

Please welcome the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. the leader of the civil rights movement and the pioneer of nonviolent resistance in America.

Thank you gentlemen for coming in this our time of darkness. America appears to be going in the wrong direction and so we seek your counsel. We will follow the political debate format. So audience, please hold your applause to the very end. Gentlemen, we call on each of you to tell of the dangers for America that you faced. President Eisenhower, would you

begin with the dangers posed by the Military Industrial Complex.

## ***Opening Statements***

### **Eisenhower:**

Thank you. “Until the latest of our world conflicts, (Before World War II) the United States had no armaments industry. American makers of plowshares could, with time and as required, make swords as well. But now we can no longer risk emergency improvisation of national defense; we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. Added to this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defense establishment. We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations.

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence — economic, political, and even spiritual — is felt in every city, every State house, and every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the Military Industrial Complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

Akin to, and largely responsible for the sweeping changes in our industrial-military posture, has been the technological revolution during recent decades.

In this revolution, research has become central; it also becomes more formalized, complex, and costly. A steadily increasing share is conducted for, by, or at the direction of, the Federal government.

The prospect of domination of the nation’s scholars by Federal employment, project allocations, and the power of money is ever present and is gravely to be regarded. Yet, in holding scientific research and discovery in respect, as we should, we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific technological elite.

It is the task of statesmanship to mold, to balance, and to integrate these and other forces, new and old, within the principles of our democratic system — ever aiming toward the supreme goals of our free society.” [Farewell Speech](#)

### **Host:**

Thank you President Eisenhower. It appears that the danger of misplaced power has grown more grave. In our time the Military Industrial Complex is in charge - bribing statesmen, financing academic research, and perverting technological innovation by waging more and more wars for higher and higher profits.

President Jefferson, as one of the founding fathers, we are interested in your perspective on the dangers that faced America at its beginning.

**Thomas Jefferson:**

Thank you all for being here tonight. "Men by their constitutions are naturally divided into two parties: those who fear and distrust the people, and wish to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes, namely the aristocrats; and those who identify themselves with the people, have confidence in them, cherish and consider them as the most honest and safe, namely the democrats. Letter to Henry Lee, 8/10/1824

What has destroyed liberty and the rights of man in every government which has ever existed under the Sun is the generalizing and concentrating all cares and powers into one body, no matter whether of the autocrats of Russia or France, or the aristocrats of a Venetian Senate (within our own borders, or of our Federal Government.) Letter to Joseph Cabell 2/2/1816

(In my time) our country is now (was already) taking so steady a course as to show by what road it will pass to destruction, to wit (namely): by consolidation of power first, and then corruption, its necessary consequence. Letter to Nathaniel Macon, 1821

(To avoid that) I wish, therefore, to see maintained that wholesome distribution of powers established by the constitution for the limitation of government with foreign concerns limited to the Federal Government and home concerns to the States. Never should we see all offices transferred to Washington, where, further withdrawn from the eyes of the people they may more secretly be bought and sold as at market. Letter to William Johnson, 6/19/1823

(Furthermore,) I hope we shall crush in its birth the aristocracy of our moneyed corporations which dare already to challenge our government to a trial of strength and bid defiance to the laws of our country." Letter to John Taylor, 5/23/1816

**Host:** Thank you President Jefferson. It appears that the race for the consolidation of power continues to tear apart the restraints of the Constitution. Even business has turned into a battlefield with powerful corporations devouring their competition. In the same manner our news has been consolidated to a point where our democratic institutions are in peril.

**Jefferson:** Newspapers, why "truth itself becomes suspicious (suspect) by being put into that polluted vehicle." (I'm afraid that)" advertisements contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper." Letter to Nathaniel Macon, 1/12/1819

**Host:** Not any more, even advertizing is a source of mind control. Technology has now grown to a point where we can record and replay events. But even that advancement has failed to protect truth. Unfortunately the art of deceit has grown into the science of propaganda. And those who profit from deceit are free to use that dark science.

Rev. King, as the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, we are interested in your thoughts about our involvement in so many wars.

**Martin Luther King:**

(I am honored to be here. I believe that) “every man lives in two realms, the internal and the external. The internal is that realm of spiritual ends expressed in art, literature, morals, and religion. The external is that complex of devices, techniques, mechanisms, and instrumentalities by means of which we live. Our problem today is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external. We have allowed the means by which we live to outdistance the ends for which we live. So much of modern life can be summarized in that arresting dictum of the poet Thoreau: “Improved means to an unimproved end”. This is the serious predicament, the deep and haunting problem confronting modern man. If we are to survive today, our moral and spiritual “lag” must be eliminated. Enlarged material powers spell enlarged peril if there is not proportionate growth of the soul. When the “without” of man’s nature subjugates the “within”, dark storm clouds begin to form in the world. Nobel Lecture, 12/ 11/1964

It will (To establish that balance within politics we must) look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, ‘This is not just.’ It will (We must) look at our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America and say, ‘This is not just.’ The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war, ‘This way of settling differences is not just.’ This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation’s homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” [Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Brake Silence](#)

**Host:** Thank you Rev. King. The storm clouds of war darken with the growing collusion between the government and corporations. In the name of security, aggression is called defense; and exploitation is called national interest while the cries for justice of an impoverished world remain silenced by corporate news.

Gentlemen, thank you all for your opening statements. Please enter into a conversation with each other.

**Conversation**

**Jefferson:** General Eisenhower, you spoke of the necessity of vast arms industries conjoined with an immense military establishment. And you hope that statesmen can balance this with democracy and freedom. As I mentioned in my opening statement that I too “feared for our government due to the strength and defiance of corporations” and that was in 1816. I imagine that arms industries would be vastly more dangerous. As for an immense military establishment, even “a standing army endangers our lives and liberties.”

Letter to John Taylor 5/28/1816

You say that we can no longer risk emergency improvisation for national defense; rather we require this Military Industrial Complex. I see that “our resources will be exhausted whenever a speck of war is visible in our horizon, instead of being reserved for what is really to take place (real needs.)” Sixth Annual Message to Congress, 12/2/1806

Gentlemen, “liberty is dangerous.” We must be brave and confident that we can meet our security needs. Dr. Franklin said it well, “Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.”

**Eisenhower:** The “technological revolution is largely responsible for the necessity for the Military Industrial Complex” within the present world structures. On the other hand, “I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity.” Speech in Ottawa, 1/10/1946

And like President Jefferson, I recognize the futility and waste of war. “That every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.

This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, and the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.” The Chance for Peace, 4/16/1953

**King:** (I have felt that connection.) “A few years ago there was a shining moment in the struggle against poverty. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor – both black and white – through the Poverty Program. Then came the build-up in Vietnam, and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political play thing of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.” Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence, 4/1967

**Jefferson:** “All men know that war is a losing game to both parties. [1](#) It is the greatest scourge of mankind. [2](#) It not only robs the present but the future generations. If it were incumbent on every generation to pay its own debts as it goes, that would prevent one-half the wars of the world. [3](#) I predict future happiness for Americans if they (we) can prevent the government from wasting the labors of the people under the pretense of taking care of (protecting) them.” [4](#)

**King:** Gentlemen, “we will not build a peaceful world by following a negative path. It is not enough to say ‘We must not wage war.’ It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it.” President Eisenhower, what is your peace plan? Nobel Lecture, 12/ 11/1964

**Eisenhower:** I think “there are a few clear precepts which govern the conduct of world affairs.

First: No people on earth can be held, as a people, to be enemy, for all humanity shares the common hunger for peace and fellowship and justice.

Second: No nation’s security and well-being can be lastingly achieved in isolation but only in effective cooperation with fellow-nations.

Third: Any nation’s right to form a government and an economic system of its own choosing is inalienable.

Fourth: Any nation’s attempt to dictate to other nations their form of government is indefensible.

And fifth: A nation’s hope of lasting peace cannot be firmly based upon any race in armaments but rather upon just relations and honest understanding with all other nations.

I believe that these principles define a way toward true peace.” The Chance for Peace

**King:** I agree with those principles; but, did your administration live by them? Didn’t you treat the communist as enemies? Didn’t you try to isolate them? Did you allow Vietnam to choose its government or its economic system? Did you restrict the armaments race?

**Eisenhower:** I believe those principles would have lead to true peace; but, “the Soviet government held a vastly different vision of the future. In the world of its design, security was to be found, not in mutual trust and mutual aid but in force: huge armies, subversion, and rule of neighbor nations. The goal was power superiority at all costs. Security was to be sought by denying it to all others. The result has been tragic for the world and, for the Soviet Union, it has also been ironic.” The Chance for Peace

**Host:** Fifty tragic years later the irony falls on us, for now our government has taken the place of the Soviets – by our security at all costs with military expenditures almost as large as all other nations combined, by our superiority with over 700 military bases in over 120 countries around the world, by our dominance from economic coercion, and by our subversion with covert mercenaries. President Eisenhower, America has become the new Soviet Union. President Jefferson, America has become the new British Empire.

**King:** “Gentlemen, we cannot achieve peaceful ends by violent means. We need a new method to resolve our conflicts.”

Nonviolent resistance is a new political dynamic pioneered by Mohandas Gandhi to attain independence from Great Britain; and used in the Civil Rights movement here in America.

“In a real sense nonviolence seeks to redeem the spiritual and moral lag that I spoke of earlier as the chief dilemma of modern man. It seeks to secure moral ends through moral means. Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon. Indeed, it is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it.

The nonviolent resisters can summarize their message in the following simple terms: we will take direct action against injustice despite the failure of governmental and other official agencies to act first. We will not obey unjust laws or submit to unjust practices. We will do

this peacefully, openly, cheerfully because our aim is to persuade. We adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself. We will try to persuade with our words, but if our words fail, we will try to persuade with our acts. We will always be willing to talk and seek fair compromise, but we are ready to suffer when necessary and even risk our lives to become witnesses to truth as we see it.

I believe in this method because I think it is the only way to reestablish a broken community. It is the method which seeks to implement the just law by appealing to the conscience of the great decent majority who through blindness, fear, pride, and irrationality have allowed their consciences to sleep.” [Nobel Lecture, 12/ 11/1964](#)

**Jefferson:** Reverend King, I’m shocked! Are you telling me that India broke free of Great Britain without a fight! That the American Colonies could have had independence without the Revolutionary War. With due respect, sir, I do not believe it.

**Host:** President Jefferson, a lot of progress has been made in the two hundred years since your presidency. As Rev. King said nonviolent resistance is a new political dynamic pioneered by Mohandas Gandhi beginning in South Africa in 1906. He later used it to attain Indian independence from Great Britain; and it was Rev. King who used it in the Civil Rights movement here in America, which led to desegregation in the United States. These principles of peace have succeeded in so many contexts as to make war obsolete.

**King:** “Mahatma Gandhi embodied in his life certain universal principles that are inherent in the moral structure of the universe, and these principles are as inescapable as the law of gravitation.” Farewell Statement for All India Radio, 3/9/1959

**Jefferson:** Rev. King, I have a dream. In my version of the Declaration of Independence, I deplored slavery as a “cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty”. That entire section was stricken from the Declaration. Draft of the Declaration of Independence

So now I am overjoyed that we can finally live by the self-evident truth that all men are created equal. But I am most intrigued by this method of nonviolent resistance for it points to a way of revolution without, as you say, wounding as well as reuniting a community broken by injustice.

(Gentlemen,) “Experience hath shown that even under the best forms of government those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny. When the Law of the majority ceases to be acknowledged, there government ends, the Law of the strongest takes its place, and life and property are his who can take them. Letter to John Gassway, 2/17/1809

Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.” Declaration of Independence, 7/4/1776

**King:**(President Jefferson, in 1945 the country of Vietnam began their Declaration of Independence by quoting yours,) “All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” (Our country ended up going to war with Vietnam. This shows that “our nation has taken the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up

the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investment.

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin to shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores." Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Brake Silence

**Eisenhower:** (As for militarism) "if men can develop weapons that are so terrifying as to make the thought of global war include almost a sentence for suicide, you would think that man's intelligence and his comprehension... would include also his ability to find a peaceful solution.

The hunger for peace is too great, the hour in history too late, for any government to mock men's hopes with mere words and promises and gestures. The Chance for Peace

I like to believe that people in the long run are going to do more to promote peace than our governments. Indeed, I think that people want peace so much that one of these days; governments had better get out of the way and let them have it." Speech in Ottawa 1/10/1946

**Host:**Gentlemen, thank you all for your deep insights. It is now time that each of you give a closing statement. First President Jefferson, then Rev. King, and ending with President Eisenhower.

### ***Closing Statements***

**Jefferson:** Rev. King points to a lag where moral and spiritual ends are overwhelmed by material and technological powers. I believe it was the consolidation of religious powers that caused that lag. "For it was but a short time that elapsed after the death of the great reformer of the Jewish religion before his principles were departed from by those who professed to be his special servants, and perverted them into an engine for enslaving mankind: that the purest system of morals ever before preached to man has been adulterated and sophisticated by artificial constructions, into a mere contrivance to filch wealth and power to themselves, that (when) rational men not being (were not) able to swallow their impious heresies, (the religious aristocracy) in order to force them (their heresies) down their throats, they raise the hue and cry of infidelity, while they themselves are the greatest obstacles to the advancement of the real doctrines of Jesus, and do in fact constitute the real Anti-Christ." (Thus the spiritual lag arises from moral intolerance enforced by the abuse of religious power.) Letter to Samuel Kercheval, 1/19/1810

**King:** "We can no longer afford to worship the God of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate. This means that more and more our loyalties must become



ecumenical rather than sectional. We must now give an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in our individual societies. This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men. Love is the key to the solution of the problems of the world." Nobel Lecture, 12/ 11/1964

**Eisenhower:** "We pray that peoples of all faiths, all races, all nations, may have their great human needs satisfied; that those now denied opportunity shall come to enjoy it to the full; that all who yearn for freedom may experience its spiritual blessings; that those who have freedom will understand, also, its heavy responsibilities; that all who are insensitive to the needs of others will learn charity; that the scourges of poverty, disease and ignorance will be made to disappear from the earth, and that, in the goodness of time, all peoples will come to live together in a peace guaranteed by the binding force of mutual respect and love." Farwell Address

**King:**Amen

**Host:**Thank you gentlemen. And so we, citizens of now, face their diagnosis of dangers for our country, our culture, even our character.

For Eisenhower the danger is the accumulation of power by the collusion between the military, industry and government to such a degree that war becomes suicide; his medicine - we the people, not the government, must free each other from that cross of iron that is war and restrain a government that makes war inevitable. But what if the government will not yield to the people's hunger for peace? Eisenhower warns the government that it better get out of the way and let people have peace.

For Jefferson the danger is the accumulation of power in government and religion; his medicine - a revolution of institutions that keeps pace with our progress of knowledge and protects human rights for everyone, worldwide revolutions to share power and constrain its abuses.

For King the danger is that our consciences are deluded by fear, hate, and extreme materialism into believing that violence is the best way to settle conflicts. His medicine - to save the soul of America we need a revolution of values with a wisdom that we depend on each other, with a justice that rejects profits at the expense of human needs, and with an all embracing and unconditional love for humanity.

And so citizens of the world are we to be paralyzed by fear and let these festering dangers threaten the entire world or will we follow Rev. King's lead and use the powerful force of nonviolence, "and recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility (resistance) to poverty, racism and militarism and boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores?"

It is our choice - the cross of iron that is war or peace guaranteed by the binding force of unconditional respect and love.

Thank you, gentlemen; and thank you audience.

(46 min)

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