Voices of Conscience During Times of War

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As we join together to remember and honor the life and accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., let us recall not only his tremendous contributions in leading our nation toward greater equality under the law, but also for his courageous, albeit delayed, eloquent voice of conscience about the moral tragedy of the war in Vietnam.

Of vital importance, let us not recall his voice of conscience in opposition to an unjust war as being within an insular realm belonging to a few great men, but as an example for all who seek to conform their actions with their awareness of what is right and what is wrong.

Dr. King delivered an extraordinary speech at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967. He prefaced his remarks by quoting a sentence from a statement of the executive committee of an organization called Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam. It is a sentence that carries with it enormous moral and political implications: "A time comes when silence is betrayal." Let us all retain those seven words in our memories and in our hearts – and then act accordingly. It bears repeating: "A time comes when silence is betrayal."

Silence is at times of moral crisis a betrayal to our consciences – our awareness of right and wrong. Silence is at such times a betrayal to our nation and our progeny. And silence is at such times a betrayal of our brothers and sisters who suffer when we do not speak up and act to stop injustices and misery.

Dr. King was speaking about the war in Vietnam and the duty all men and women had to speak the truth about that unjust war. He recognized the reticence most people have in speaking out against what their country is

doing during wartime. As he stated, “Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government’s policy, especially in time of war.” He also recognized the forces of inertia faced by us all, stating, “Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one’s own bosom and in the surrounding world.” Finally, Dr. King noted how the complexities of a situation can be paralyzing, leading us to do nothing, even when we know we should. Dr. King said, “[W]hen the issues at hand seem as perplexing as they often do in the case of this dreadful conflict, we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty.”

He concluded the discussion of these challenges by saying, simply, “But we must move on.”

He noted that “the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.”

Dr. King conceded that he was late in speaking out, noting that his own silence had been a betrayal – but that he was finally breaking the betrayal in order to, as he put it, “speak from the burnings of my own heart” to call for “radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam.”

He noted the resistance he had experienced from people who questioned why he, a civil rights leader, would get involved in opposing the Vietnam war. As Dr. King described it, “[M]any persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns, this query has often loomed large and loud: ‘Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent?’ ‘Peace and civil rights don’t mix,’ they say. ‘Aren’t you hurting the cause of your people?’ they ask.” Then Dr. King provided seven reasons for bringing the Vietnam war into, as he described it, the field of his moral vision.

Those seven reasons, to describe them briefly, were:

First, the resources of the United States required to help the poor would never be invested for that cause “so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube.” Dr. King was “compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.”

Second, the poor were "sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population." Dr. King declared that he "could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor."

Third, Dr. King found it impossible to reconcile the violence in Vietnam with his conviction that "social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action." He proclaimed: "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. For the sake of those boys, for the sake of this government, for the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent."

Fourth, for the sake of America's integrity and life – for the sake of its soul – protest and dissent against the injustices of the Vietnam war are compelled.

Fifth, Dr. King referred to the burden of responsibility placed upon him in 1964 when he received the Nobel Peace Prize, which he considered to be a "commission to work harder than [he] had ever worked before for the brotherhood of man." That was a calling that he understood to take him "beyond national allegiances."

Sixth, as one who engaged in the ministry of Jesus Christ, Dr. King recognized his duty to work for peace. About those who asked him why he was speaking out against the war, Dr. King asked: "Could it be that they do not know that the Good News was meant for all men – for communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them?"

Seventh, Dr. King invoked his conviction that he shared with all men "the calling to a son of the living God," and noted that those who believe in a brotherhood with all others are "bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism." According to Dr. King, "We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls 'enemy,' for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers."

Dr. King stood up bravely against the outrages and deceits of US policies and practices, even daring to ask that we seek to understand how the perceived enemy viewed us. He said: "Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition."

Perhaps with the exception of the religion-driven mandates, the imperatives that led Dr. King to stand against the US war in Vietnam apply equally to each of us when an unjust and illegal war of aggression is being threatened or waged. The crucial questions we must all answer are: In the face of killing, maiming, and displacing innocent people, what did we do? What did we refrain from doing? And what are we doing or failing to do right now? What, other than inertia, or intimidation, or cowardice, or inattention, or being a craven participant in a culture of amoral, or immoral, blind obedience, can possibly explain a failure to stand up, oppose, and take action to stop the invasion and continued occupation of Iraq?

The facts are uncontroverted. The American people were being told that Iraq was building up a nuclear arsenal, while, in fact, there was tremendous disagreement within the intelligence community and by the Department of Energy – a disagreement that was concealed in fraudulent fashion by President Bush, Vice-President Cheney, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, then-National Security Advisor Condeleezza Rice, and others. That disagreement was reflected in an October 2002 National Security Estimate, which was available to members of Congress, yet many members, including president-elect Obama's choice for Secretary of State, did not even bother to read that crucial document before voting to go to war.

The United Nations weapons inspectors were, before the US invasion of Iraq, granted full access to anywhere they wanted to visit. They reported that there was no evidence of any weapons of mass destruction.

The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohammed el-Baradei announced twelve days before the invasion of Iraq that the documents that formed the sole basis for the administration's claims that Iraq had attempted to purchase uranium from Niger were blatant forgeries.

Prior to that finding, the intelligence agency within the State Department, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, stated in the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate that the Bush administration's claims about Iraq trying to purchase uranium from Niger were "highly dubious." We know that President Bush and others in his administration did not inform us of that, but where, now, is the accountability? And where is our outrage?

There were lies upon lies, failures to disclose crucial information, and public reports about the lack of evidence of weapons of mass destruction. Yet we, the American people, stood by, complacently and complicitly, as our nation violated the most solemn of treaty obligations, including the United Nations Charter, and engaged in a war of aggression against a nation that posed no threat whatsoever to the United States. It was a violation of international law so serious that men were convicted at Nuremberg for the same offense. The prohibition of such wars of aggression was the core purpose behind the founding of the United Nations, yet that prohibition seemed to mean nothing to the President, the Congress, most of the media, and, tragically, to most of the American people.

As hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi men, women, and children died; as hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi men, women, and children were maimed; as hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi men, women, and children were forced from their homes; as terrorism and hatred toward the United States mushroomed throughout the Muslim world – all as a result of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq – what did we, the American people – and what did *you* – do?

We have known for years that, contrary to explicit prohibitions in several treaties and US domestic laws, people were being tortured as a result of the policies of high US officials. We have known for years that people were being illegally kidnapped, disappeared, and tortured by US officials or sent by US officials to be tortured by others. Yet Congress, even the courts, and the vast majority of the American people stood complacently by and allowed it to happen, all without even raising their voices in opposition. Again, we must ask ourselves, in light of the evil that has been perpetrated in our name, what did we, the American people – and what did *you* – do?

This immoral complacency and gross hypocrisy is nothing new. Christians often cite St. Matthew and the injunction that as we treat "the least of these my brethren" so do we treat Jesus Christ – and that for such

treatment we will be held to account on judgment day. Yet how have those who claim Christian beliefs actually conducted themselves?

Again, the immoral abrogation of our role as moral actors and the hypocrisy is nothing new. Consider what was written by Teófilo Cabestrero about the brutality that occurred in Nicaragua during the US-controlled and –financed Contra war during the 1980s:

> I can already hear the words of Jesus Christ to us on the day of judgment: "I was innocent in Nicaragua. I was poor and defenseless. And I was kidnapped to Honduras. I was afraid of death threats. I was afraid when they burned my house. I was a reading teacher. I was a minister of the Word of God. I was seeking to render some service in the community. And they killed me with slashes of the knife. They raped me. They left me an orphan when I was six days old, and their amusement was to shoot me point-blank and laugh at me, a child screaming in terror. They cut my throat. They burned me alive. They slaughtered me."
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> And with those who believe that there is a great deal more in this innocent blood than meets the eye, I know that the Lord will ask us: "What did you do about it?"

For inspiration, let us keep in mind the example of others who have followed their consciences, even when the personal stakes were high.

Perhaps the greatest voice of conscience during my lifetime has been Daniel Ellsberg. He had it made: A Ph.D. in Economics from Harvard, a Marine commander, a trusted official in the Pentagon under Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and a Rand Corporation analyst. He had a security clearance that enabled him to do his high-level work.

During the course of his work, he learned of a secret study that had been completed by order of Secretary McNamara, which exposed the lies of presidents and their administrations during three decades in connection with the Vietnam War. He also learned of a plan by the Nixon administration to use nuclear weapons against Hanoi.

Moved by the example of a young man who was going to go to prison rather than be drafted to fight in Vietnam, and by the teachings of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and others, he made a life-altering decision based on

conscience. Knowing that he would certainly lose his security clearance and his career, and that he might be convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, he made copies of the report, later known as the Pentagon Papers, and provided it to several people in Congress and to numerous newspapers. He did it to expose the truth to the American people and to help end the killing. He did it because his conscience told him it was the right thing to do – and because he had, after many years of being the "good soldier," the courage to follow his conscience.

As he expected, he lost his security clearance and his career, and he went to trial, with a risk of spending the rest of his life behind bars. When it was disclosed that Nixon administration operatives had illegally wiretapped his communications and burglarized his psychiatrist's office and stole his files, the judge dismissed the case on the basis of prosecutorial misconduct. The approval by Nixon to pay one of the burglars to keep him quiet served as the basis for one of the proposed articles of impeachment against Nixon.

In his remarkable book, *Secrets – A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, Ellsberg refers to some of the ethical principles that led him to his courageous decision to disclose the truth. Similar to what Dr. King said about our so-called enemies, Ellsberg wrote:

> In Gandhi's teaching, no human should be regarded or treated as being 'an enemy,' in the sense of someone you have a right to destroy, or to hate, or to regard as alien, from whom you cannot learn, for whom you can feel no understanding or concern. These are simply not appropriate attitudes toward another human being. No one should be regarded as being – in his or her essence or permanently – evil or as utterly antagonistic. No people should be seen as being evil persons, as if they were without good in them, a different, less human order of being, as if one could learn nothing from them or as if they were unchangeable, even if what they were *doing* in the moment was harmful and terrible, indeed evil, and needed to be opposed. Thus the whole notion of enemy was both unneeded and dangerously misleading.[1]

[1] Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets – A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (Viking Penguin: New York, 2002), p. 212.

Citing a friend from India, Ellsberg wrote that she pointed out that "[n]early all evildoing, . . . like nearly all coercive power, legitimate and illegitimate, depends on the cooperation, on the obedience and support, on the assent or at least passive tolerance of many people. It relies on many more collaborators than are conscious of their roles; these include even many victims, along with passive bystanders, as in effect accomplices. Such cooperation could be withdrawn with powerful effect." Then Ellsberg quoted from Dr. King: ""He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it."[2]

A consistent theme emerges among those who reflect in their actions the convictions of their consciences. Those who feel strongly about what is right and what is wrong, and who act accordingly, even at risk to themselves, because of their commitment to moral principles understand that we are *all* responsible – that each of us has the choice to either rise up against wrongdoing or, even through passive inaction, support and become complicit in it.

Let us all, from this day forward, assume the obligation we have as moral actors to learn the truth by wisely informing ourselves, to apply our sense of right and wrong with integrity and courage, and, finally, to act according to the urgings of our consciences. Moral conduct is not exclusively in the realm of the Dr. Kings and the Daniel Ellsbergs. It is in the realm of mankind and womankind – and in the realm of each of our lives.

Let us be able to look back on our years on this Earth and honestly say we took a stand, we acted, we even fought, in the service of what is right – in helping those in need, of applying love and compassion in our dealings with all others, in ferreting out and facing the truth, and in reducing suffering and increasing happiness for others. Let us never be silent – and let us raise our voices and conduct ourselves consistently with our informed awareness of right and wrong.

Nothing in the world can be more important than that.

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[2] *Id.*, p. 213.