Identity as Calling: Martin Luther King on War

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After several weeks of speaking out on various occasions against the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King, Jr., chose to deliver his most considered statement at Riverside Church in New York, at an event sponsored by the group Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam. The date—April 4, 1967—was chosen for maximum political impact (it was also exactly one year before King’s assassination). In early 2003, as opposition to the pending invasion of Iraq built up at home and abroad, “A Time to Break Silence” (the name given to the speech in King’s collected writings) gained considerable exposure at peace rallies, on alternative radio stations, and elsewhere. This is hardly surprising, given its extraordinary rhetorical power and its author’s immense reputation. What is more surprising, given those same two factors, is the speech’s relative neglect during the intervening 26 years. To vary Lincoln’s phrase, it was much noted at the time but not long remembered. The reasons for this neglect, it is not hard to assume, are the ghettoizing of King in official memory as a civil rights leader and the general amnesia that has settled over the antiwar movement of the 1960s. For King on April 4, 1967, both these issues—the nature of his career and the cause of peace—became indissolubly joined, with the result that his most considered attack on the Vietnam War is also his most considered meditation on his vocation—on what it meant to him to be “Martin Luther King.” Both his conception of identity and his conception of imperialist war speak urgently to the political crisis we face today.

To a generation used to associating King with peaceableness and uplift, the most surprising features of “A Time to Break Silence” must be its relentless massing of pertinent political and military facts and the sheer relentlessness—indeed, the ferocity—of its attack. King points out, for example, that the French War was largely financed by the Americans (up to 80% at its peak), that the “two Vietnams” were a fiction attendant upon national elections that were abrogated by the puppet Ngo Dien Diem in 1956; that the National Liberation Front was a heterogeneous group of anti-Diem guerrillas, only a quarter of whom were Communist at the beginning; and so forth. It is striking to remember today
how much accurate information was available to the peace movement (though not to casual readers of the mainstream press), a mere two years into the ground war—a point that belies the claim, made repeatedly since then by defenders of the government, that opposition to the war came late and benefited from hindsight. The amassing of evidence gains power by the form King gives his argument: a series of tableaux embodying the experiences of various participants in the war, which build upon each other to form a climactic, many-sided visual totality. Significantly, he begins with the viewpoint of American soldiers recruited from the ranks of the poor and the minorities: “So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools.” From these he moves to the common people of Vietnam, then to our putative enemies—the National Liberation Front and then the North Vietnamese—holding in effect a mirror up to the United States by constructing the viewpoints of the Other. His section on the Vietnamese peasantry reaches an early pitch of outrage:

So far we have killed a million of them—mostly children. [The peasants] wander into the towns and see thousands of the children, homeless, without clothes, running in packs on the streets like animals . . . What do they think as we test out our latest weapons on them, just as the Germans tested out new medicine and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe? . . . Where are the roots of the independent Vietnam we claim to be building? . . . We have destroyed their two most cherished institutions: the family and the village. We have destroyed their land and their crops . . . We have corrupted their women and children and killed their men. What liberators! . . . Soon the only solid physical foundations remaining will be found at our military bases and in the concrete of the concentration camps we call fortified hamlets. (James, 236)

Next he returns to the American soldiers, of whom he says, “We are adding cynicism to the process of death. Before long . . . the more sophisticated surely realize that we are on the side of the wealthy and the secure while we create a hell for the poor.” The words “what liberators” echo the sarcastic phrase “Strange Liberators,” the title of this section, which repeats like a mantra. A second repeated phrase—“I speak for . . . I speak for”—clusters in the following italicized paragraph, which climaxes the section:

I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as an American to the leaders of my own nation. The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours (James, 238; italics in the original)

The effect of the language at this moment is an almost visible “subliming” or heightening—an expansion of view that matches the gathering intensity of emotion. From the poor and oppressed back home to the destroyed