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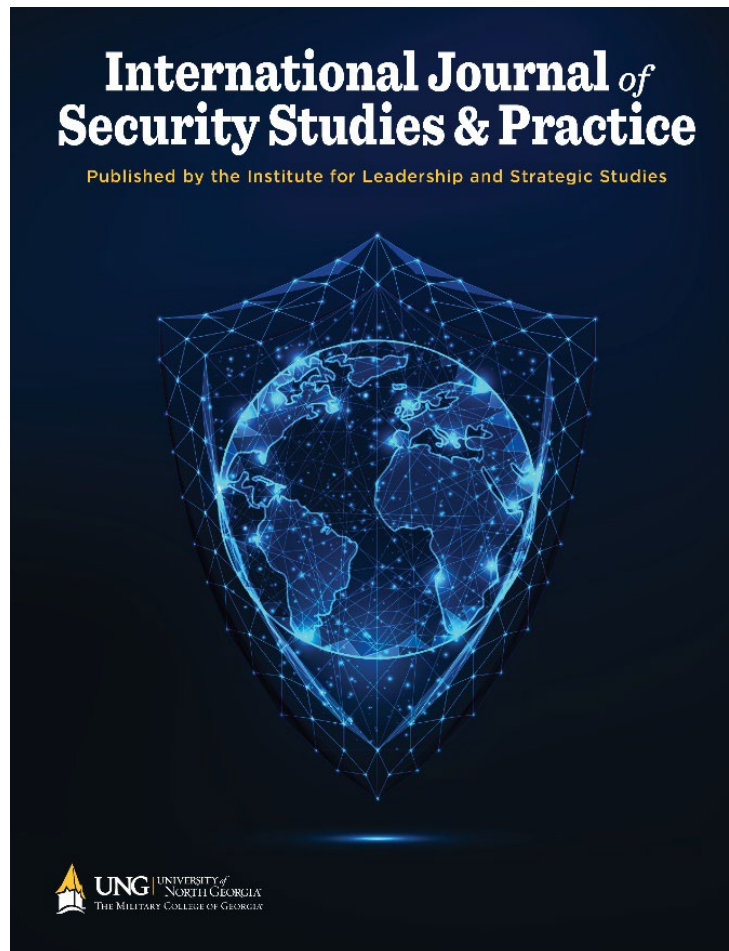
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MARTIN LUTHER KING'S LESSONS ON AMERICAN INTERVENTIONISM

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Martin Luther King's Lessons on American Interventionism

Martin Luther King was a well-known civil rights activist who was influential as a preacher and advocate for nonviolent social change. His legacy is engrained into American culture and celebrated annually on the third Monday in January. While King's "Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence" (1967) is less known than his other speeches, it is a poignant reminder of the frequency with which the United States has engaged in foreign intervention throughout American history. American policy is often myopic, as the painful intelligence mistakes and oversights regarding weapons of mass destruction and the de-Ba'athification made under the Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq (2003) clearly illustrated. With the lessons of Afghanistan in the rearview mirror, it is entirely appropriate to revisit King's speech to glean some sage insights that have been largely forgotten over the past few decades.

King admitted that he was reluctant to get involved in politics and criticize the Vietnam War because it might weaken his focus on the civil rights movement and domestic concerns. His primary motivation in writing this speech was to highlight how the war in Vietnam was impacting American progress in reducing poverty. Once the diversion of money to Vietnam began to take a toll on poverty reduction programs in America, King indicated that he was forced to speak out. In 1967 King wrote, "I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube." His argument against the Vietnam War focused on four key pillars: economics, civil rights, nonviolence/religion, and American hubris tied to supporting

corrupt/authoritarian leaders. Unfortunately, all four lessons resonate in 2022 as much as they did in 1967.

The need to eradicate poverty was paramount to King, who pointed out that America devoted more money to military spending than social programs designed to improve quality of life (1967). Although he does not cite exact statistics, contemporary studies estimate the tremendous cost of U.S. involvement in Vietnam at between \$168 billion and over \$1 trillion in today's dollars (Amadeo, 2020). King's core idea is that America should focus on domestic issues at home, although perhaps not wholly embrace isolationism. He advocated a policy that focused on promoting democracy. His frustration grew with the reduction of funding driven by excessive war costs, specifically early-on when the U.S. wanted to ensure France maintained its footprint in Vietnam.

King was essentially correct in his assessment because while U.S. aid began with only \$10 million in 1950, it reached \$1.06 billion by 1954, accounting for 78% of the cost of the French war (Gravel, 1971). His perspicacious reminder that the money would be better spent on benefitting large segments of Americans struggling to escape poverty is on point. However, the details or framework behind the specific policies were left unmentioned. Although eradicating poverty was significant, King argued that the nightly news underscored the irony of American culture concerning race relations. Clips of the war highlighted black men dying alongside white men, but Blacks could not sit together in the same school (Amadeo 2020). This fundamental contradiction struck at the core of King's civil rights movement. It implied that black men should be fighting for equality in America rather than in the

jungles of Southeast Asia 8,500 miles away, although he stops short of making this point directly. King drew attention to the fact that Americans were fighting in a foreign land under one flag, yet they could not live in the same neighborhoods or eat in the same restaurants back home. Although King tempered his words, he implied that the reality of domestic inequality was repulsive in a country attempting to promote democratic values on the other side of the planet.

King's 1964 Nobel Prize for Peace drove him to work harder in the United States and worldwide for peace and nonviolent solutions to social and geopolitical problems. One of his role models was Mohandas Gandhi, although he curiously omitted any reference to him, even though he often did so in his speeches about civil rights in America. In 1967 King asked, "How can you speak against the violence in ghettos without so much as a word directed against the most violent country in the world today, the U.S. government?" Charting a more peaceful path for civil dissent, he urged young men destined for military service to select a conscientious objector status. Peaceful solutions and diplomacy are at the heart of King's speech. At the same time, his most compelling pillar is a scathing criticism of American hubris over the right to judge other cultures that were reluctant to follow in American footsteps. These comments align with the motivations behind the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which stressed nonintervention in domestic issues of sovereign states.

King's most persuasive justification against Vietnam was based on the country's history. He argued that the Vietnamese people declared their independence after years of occupation by the French and then the Japanese, citing references to the American Declaration of Independence in the process. However,

the French refused to recognize the Vietnamese people, while American leaders claimed that they were not ready for independence. It is worth quoting from a letter that Ho Chi Minh (born Nguyen Sinh Cung, commonly known as Bac Ho) wrote to President Harry S. Truman on February 15, 1946, requesting American support. Ho wrote,

Our Vietnam people, as early as 1941, stood by the Allies' side and fought against the Japanese and their associates, the French colonialistsBut the French Colonialists . . . have come back and are waging on us a murderous and pitiless warWe request the United States as guardians and champions of World Justice to take a decisive step supporting our independence. (Kindrick, 2019)

Needless to say, Truman never responded to this letter. America was complicit in France's reckless actions in Vietnam; their defeat should have meant that Vietnam's independence was a forgone conclusion. However, the United States intervened to ensure that Minh could not unify the country because America supported the authoritarian leader Premier Diem, who was decidedly anti-communist but supported the systematic extermination of opposition and corruption at the highest levels. Diem's corruption and brutal policies spurred a coup that removed him from power; however, his removal did not result in any meaningful change. King argued that American support for corrupt government regimes appeared to be doubling down. He did not say if he thought that communism was a threat that must be eradicated, and he indicated that membership in the Communist North is less than twenty percent. Hence the communist label seemed like a misapplication of the

term. King (1967) mentioned that aside from supporting France, the primary motivation for U.S. policy was the concern over a new government that included some communists, even though Vietnam and Communist China had a troubled past relationship. China primarily worked to isolate Vietnam from the Soviet Union by supporting the Communist movement in Vietnam.

King drew parallels between the American use of new weapons, such as Agent Orange and napalm, and medical experiments conducted in concentration camps during WWII, although this was slightly exaggerated. The American focus on success by measuring the effectiveness of campaigns with enemy body bag counts appeared distorted and proved to be ultimately misguided. King referenced a pattern of American interventionism. For example, he cited a “pattern of suppression which now has justified the presence of U.S. military ‘advisors’ in Venezuela” (1967). King could have provided more analysis of the history of American intervention and stressed the use of diplomacy before deploying the military.

The Congressional Research Service continues to update a document entitled “Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2020” that serves to highlight the ease with which America deploys troops as one of its primary mechanisms of wielding instruments of national power. The data shows that the United States sent troops to China (1945), Trieste (1946), Palestine (1948), China (1948-49), Korea (1950-1953), Formosa or Taiwan (1950-1955), and Egypt (1956), to cite a few (Torreon & Plagakis, 2021, pp. 2-13). This data further reinforces King’s point about the rapidity with which America deploys troops to solve what should be diplomatic issues. The average deployment of troops through the end of

the Cold War (1991) was just one per year, although more recently, it has increased to an average of six times annually (Torreon & Plagakis, 2021).

It is difficult to fully appreciate the significance of Martin Luther King's speech because our modern understanding of the Vietnam War is viewed through a lens that recognizes the erroneous policy and the folly which characterized America's intervention. The crowd that listened to his words and read them in newspapers did not have the luxury of time and clarity of the sequence of events that followed 1967. His four main points were argued well, although diplomacy was central to King's final solution in Vietnam and a key recommendation for future American policy. He concluded his speech by illustrating that America has a choice in solving global problems. However, he ignored some of the details and nuances of international agreements by choosing between violent co-annihilation or nonviolent coexistence. Although it might seem inappropriate to focus on a religious foundation for American policy, a moral position resonates more with modern readers. King's ultimate advice echoed the sage council of John Quincy Adams, who took a more secular approach in a speech to the U.S. House of Representatives on July 4, 1821 when he suggested that America should not go "abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher of the freedom and independence of all. ... She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice and the benignant sympathy of her example." King's 1967 speech still has applications and lessons for those formulating American foreign policy today. It must focus on greater awareness of how the U.S. employs military power and the types of security commitments our nation makes.

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