

A National Tragedy and an Invaluable Lesson – the Museum That Hides Truth

John Steen

An Op-Ed about how the best of MLK's thinking is being hidden from the world, even in the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. Every year, establishment media are burying his greatest speech deeper in obscurity along with the 1960s antiwar movement of which it was a prominent part.

MLK's teachings enraged those who have reason to hate truth, so they were not satisfied with his death. They sought the death of his thinking too.

I write to object to continuation of a moral and political tragedy, the failure to include Dr. Martin Luther King's greatest speech and his antiwar advocacy in the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The conspiracy of silence that blinds us to so outrageous an omission ought to open our eyes to how commemorations of the 1960s antiwar movement are absent from American history.

Objections to war like Dr. King's and the many others from the public of his era are necessary to counter the moral corruption of those nations like ours that engage in war. The most important of the lessons Dr. King left for us is our blindness to ourselves.

On April 4, 1967, he delivered a speech in Riverside Church in Manhattan of a kind never heard before from any American political leader. It was addressed to the American people, not the government. It called upon us to open our eyes and

our minds to evils inherent in the American capitalist hegemonic system. He denounced the United States government, stating "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: my own government." That speech is, *Beyond Vietnam - A Time to Break Silence*.

I've always seen the speech as the finest political speech in America since the Gettysburg Address. He began that speech with the words, "I come to this magnificent house of worship tonight because my conscience leaves me no other choice." In it, he called out the "giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism", asserting that, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." In its political acumen, it was in keeping with Karl Marx's, "But if the designing of the future and the proclamation of ready-made solutions for all time is not our affair, then we realize all the more clearly what we have to accomplish in the present — I am speaking of a ruthless criticism of everything existing, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be." (Letter to Arnold Ruge, September, 1843) King read a bit of Marx and Gandhi at Boston University while studying for his Ph.D. He was devoted to nonviolence, but he

John Steen.PhD, retired.
Email: jwsteen@comcast.net

Received: November 23, 2023
Accepted: April 16, 2024
Conflict of interest: none.

saw all the violence we were perpetrating throughout the world.

In this speech, he asserted that there was “no meaningful solution” to the Vietnam War without taking into account the Vietnamese people, who were “the voiceless ones.” Here he addressed neither Blacks nor Americans, not civil rights but social justice, reaching the level of concern for humanity shown by Malcolm X years earlier. He traced America’s involvement in Southeast Asia since 1945, history about which Americans knew little, and decried the Vietnam War (aptly known in Vietnam as the American War) and its effect on the people of Southeast Asia as well as on our own soldiers, “taking the Black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them 8,000 miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem,” war that corrupted our nation.

Time magazine later called the speech “demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi.” *The Washington Post* called it “sheer inventions of unsupported fantasy” declaring that King had “diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country, and his people.” *The New York Times* wrote an editorial entitled “Dr. King’s Error”, and even the NAACP objected to it. That’s what can be expected when a public figure tells the whole truth.

His Great Legacy Is Being Hidden from Us

Since his assassination, his vision of social justice has been replaced in the media by the 1963 *I Have a Dream* speech in which he expressed a vision for a world where content of character matters more than skin color. In a 1965 sermon, King explained that the “majestic words” of the Declaration of Independence penned by Thomas Jefferson, that “all men are created equal,” were the cornerstone of the civil rights movement. But he devoted the final 18 months of his life to making his greater message explicit, one that promoted the solidarity of all mankind. Fifty-six years have passed now since he delivered that visionary speech at Riverside Church. Will the nation let another year pass without acknowledging his true legacy, his best teaching? He said then that “the world now demands a maturity of America that we may not

be able to achieve,” and fifty-six years later it still does. In reminding us of what most matters, he was trying to save our soul, but our redemption will now require the admission of our mistakes and our responsibility for them.

Our nation is caught up in a maelstrom of polarized conflict over issues in racial justice, and Dr. King surely devoted his life to that. But he did so much more than that. In this era of the commodification of protest, I think it is our responsibility to ensure that his being made a saint of civil rights doesn’t obscure his devotion both to America and to human rights. Let his true epitaph be known.

Let us recall one of the best-known messages he left us: “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” We must no longer allow his greatest message to be silenced in our media, one that insisted that all lives matter.

And note that *time* is in the title of his speech, time that is now paramount in trying to save our world from nuclear war, climate change, and other critical injustices in the use of power:

We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time.

Life often leaves us standing bare, naked, and dejected with a lost opportunity. The tide in the affairs of men does not remain at flood – it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is adamant to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, “Too late.”

It is paramount to add what is missing from his legacy to the Museum, not only his speech, but the antiwar activism that it inspired. Dr. King enlightened us to the many lies incorporated in the American Myth. As a great teacher, his lessons to us need to be displayed there much as his namesake Martin Luther’s Ninety-five Theses were posted on the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg.

Like Socrates, King's life was devoted to teaching the citizenry to question and to think clearly, especially about the democracy that was first established in Socrates's Athens and was at risk here on January 6, 2021. He had a radical democratic vision committed to trying "to make America what it ought to be." (*Final Speech*, Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968) He shone great light wherever greed, prejudice, inequality and hypocrisy were to be found. I don't know of a

better epitaph for King's life than to celebrate how he taught us all to be the kind of citizens a democracy needs to flourish, and a world needs to survive.

After his death, it took Congress 15 years just to establish MLK Day in 1983. Sen. Jesse Helms criticized his opposition to the Vietnam War and accused him of espousing "action-oriented Marxism." I've not heard a greater tribute to King than that.

