



MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.'S RIVERSIDE SPEECH AND COLD WAR CIVIL RIGHTS

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This article examines Martin Luther King, Jr.'s controversial Riverside Speech where he denounced the Vietnam War. Although King's biographers and other scholars have written about the Riverside speech, they have not analyzed King's Riverside speech through the prism of Cold War Civil Rights. This examination of King's Riverside speech remedies this omission by explaining why King waited so long to speak out against the war, and why civil rights activists as late as 1967 were still wary about criticizing American Cold War foreign policy because of the legacy of the Red Scare. While the Cold War helped spur civil rights advances, this article demonstrates that the civil rights movement was a casualty of the Vietnam War.

On the evening of April 4, 1967, after two years of anguish over the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King, Jr., finally delivered a highly anticipated speech before 3,000 people at the Riverside Church in New York City. Entitled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," King's speech attacked the Vietnam War and American Cold War policy, and he indicted the U.S. government as the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."¹ One of the reasons King broke his long silence was his belief that the United States was on the wrong side of the worldwide fight against imperialism. He called for "a revolution of values" that would enable the American nation "to get on the right side of the world revolution" raging throughout Asia, African, and Latin America.² Undergirding King's critique of the war was a nuanced examination of the United States' historical failure to support Vietnam's quest for national independence because of a "morbid fear of communism." He further called for a "revolution of values" against excessive materialism and capitalism, and he condemned the Western practice of investing huge sums of money in the Third World, only

“to take profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries.”³ To the chagrin of most of his inner circle who feared that King would be derided as an unpatriotic leftist or a “Vietnik,” King chose to speak out because he believed that issues of world peace and civil rights were indivisible, and he decried how the Vietnam War had eviscerated the War on Poverty “as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war.”⁴

King’s Riverside speech was the culmination of a long, tortuous journey. He had expressed misgivings about the war as early as 1965 but then retreated in the face of withering criticism.⁵ Although the speech is not as well-known as his “I Have a Dream” speech at the 1963 March on Washington it epitomized King’s long-standing contempt for the “triple evils” of economic exploitation, racism, and militarism. As such, it evidenced King’s radical critiques of American capitalism and militarism, which have been obscured by attempts to sanitize him and render him a “convenient hero.”⁶

King’s condemnation of American foreign policy immediately sent shockwaves throughout the nation and the civil rights establishment. While his denunciation of the Vietnam War thrilled the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which had come out against the war in 1966, it provoked a torrent of criticism from the liberal establishment. This included the “moderate” wing of the civil rights movement, consisting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, and other pillars of the establishment.⁷ The NAACP distanced itself from King’s speech and viewed the antiwar movement through a red prism. A few days after the Riverside speech, Gloster Current, NAACP Director of Branches urged the association to take measures to ensure that it is not perceived as a “tool of the international communist conspiracy.”⁸

The Riverside speech was met with near universal condemnation, but critics blithely ignored King’s detailed analysis and resorted to *ad hominem* attacks, accusing him of speaking on matters that were outside his purview as a civil rights leader. *Newsweek* indicted him for “plunging in over his head,” and the editorial board of the largest African American newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, rebuked King for “tragically preaching the wrong doctrine” on issues that were “too complex for simple debate.”⁹ The forebodings of his closest aides proved well-founded, as his forthright critiques of American policy in South-East Asia led many to question his patriotism. For instance, *Life*

magazine called King's speech "a demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi."¹⁰ African American journalist Carl Rowan was not alone in resorting to red-baiting when he accused King of being "an egomaniac who was under the sway of communists."¹¹ In a revealing remark, White House advisor John Roche dismissed the speech as the mutterings of a "loser," who in "desperately searching for a constituency" has now "thrown his lot in with the commies."¹² The Riverside speech caused the FBI to increase its surveillance and harassment of King, and the Johnson administration considered King more of a threat to the U.S. government than ever before.¹³

King's delay in speaking out against the Vietnam War and the vitriol that followed his Riverside address has caught the attention of scholars and journalists alike. His temporizing was striking, as King was the foremost American apostle of nonviolence, and by 1965, the Vietnam War had displaced the civil rights movement as the most pressing item on the nation's agenda.¹⁴ For the past few years, leaders of the burgeoning albeit fractious antiwar movement had been yearning for King to merge the peace and freedom wings of the reform movement.¹⁵ Accordingly, King's break with the Johnson administration over foreign policy was a pivotal event of the 1960s, and the vociferous opposition testified to the intractability of the Cold War mind-set that conflated dissent from American foreign policy with treachery well into the late 1960s.

What explains King's equivocations on the Vietnam War and the establishment's evisceration of his Riverside speech? In 1966, Europeans had been baffled by his silence on the war causing one European diplomat to comment, "King wears a muzzle on Vietnam."¹⁶ King's major biographers have not resolved this conundrum. In his magisterial Pulitzer Prize-winning trilogy, Taylor Branch devotes considerable attention in his final book to King's break with the Johnson administration over the war. But Branch's engrossing work with its rich anecdotes contains scant analysis and interpretation.¹⁷ David J. Garrow's massive and scholarly biography, which also won a Pulitzer Prize, similarly lacks an explanation of King's break with the Vietnam War, and the analysis and of King's worldview is buried beneath a welter of information about King's quotidian affairs.¹⁸ Although Adam Fairclough's institutional biography of King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) is the sparer work, he attributes King's actions with respect to Vietnam to his pragmatism. Whereas King was wary about getting too far ahead of the war issue in 1965, Fairclough

contends that by early 1967, King had seized on the Vietnam issue to enhance the flagging support for the civil rights movement, which was disintegrating and divided after its success in dismantling segregation.¹⁹ While these biographies have enriched our understanding of the quandary the Vietnam War posed for King and the civil rights movement, they do not adequately explain King's painful dilemma.²⁰

Other works have stressed the civil rights movement's reluctance to break with Lyndon B. Johnson and the regnant liberal establishment. Vietnam was Johnson's war, and the civil rights movement owed LBJ an enormous debt of gratitude for his political stewardship in dismantling *de jure* segregation. In recent years, historians have rehabilitated Johnson from the stigma of Vietnam and accepted NAACP head Roy Wilkins' assessment that LBJ did more for civil rights than any other president since Abraham Lincoln.²¹ In the mid-1960s, after President Johnson Americanized the war in Vietnam, King harbored hopes that he could continue his productive relationship with the president.²² But even his mentor Bayard Rustin, a World War II conscientious objector, cautioned King that the president's support might be diluted if the civil rights movement took a strong stand against the administration's policy on Vietnam.²³ Except for the fiery and emotionally unstable James Bevel, all of King's inner circle agreed with Rustin and worried about the political repercussions of alienating the president by speaking against the war.

A smattering of works on the nexus between the antiwar and civil rights movements has emerged in the past few decades, adding insight into the fractious debates over King's Riverside address. Some historians have attributed the moderates' animus to the warm personal relationships they cultivated with LBJ and the liberal establishment, particularly Roy Wilkins and Whitney M. Young, Jr., of the National Urban League.²⁴ Manfred Berg has detailed how the NAACP's opposition to King's antiwar speech was informed by its concepts of patriotism and loyalty, and its belief that "guns and butter" were not mutually exclusive aims during the golden age of American prosperity.²⁵ British historian Simon Hall stresses that the "moderate wing of the civil rights movement" was wary of nonviolent direct action and mass protest and retained its belief in working within the system for racial progress.²⁶ In addition, the civil rights movement was always an amalgam of disparate organizations led by individuals with titanic egos and clashing agendas, and the Vietnam War exacerbated strains within the civil rights coalition. These works have contributed to our

understanding of the moderates' hostile reaction to King's Riverside speech.

Other studies of bottom-up social history have underscored another reason for the civil rights movement's reluctance to criticize the Vietnam War: the presence of thousands of African American soldiers fighting and dying in South-East Asia in the first war fought by ostensibly integrated armed forces.²⁷ The civil rights movement had long regarded integration of the military as an important benchmark on the road to full equality.²⁸ In the mid-1960s, the black press published a number of gushing stories touting the heroism of the "new black soldiers" who were proving themselves worthy of their newly acquired civil rights by fighting for freedom against the communist foe in Vietnam.²⁹ The notion of military service as "Harvard" for blacks became a trope to many civil rights leaders such as Whitney Young, Jr., who went to Vietnam twice at Johnson's behest. However, Kimberley L. Phillips recently exploded the myth that military service hastened progress in the black freedom struggle.³⁰ By 1966, King was complaining about the difficulty of getting young black men interested in nonviolence when the military was using them as cannon fodder in Vietnam.

This article demonstrates that a crucial, but often overlooked explanation for King's tortuous path to antiwar activist, and the reaction to his Riverside speech, was the broader intellectual, cultural, and political milieu of the Cold War and the lingering legacy of the Red Scare and McCarthyism that conflated dissent with treason. The proliferation of works on the so-called long civil rights movement, which extends the temporal and spatial boundaries of the African American freedom struggle, furnishes additional tools for understanding King's dilemma over the Vietnam War. In addition to the immediate context, King had to contend with long-term structural factors of American life that were shaped by the Cold War. Indeed, King's decision to mix issues of peace and freedom was anathema to many members of the civil rights movement who were haunted by the red-baiting of black peace activists in the early years of the Cold War. Despite the thaw in the Red Scare following the passing of McCarthyism in the mid-1950s, the civil rights movement remained wary of speaking out against American foreign policy until the late 1960s. As historian Robbie Lieberman has shown, the Cold War severed the issues of peace and freedom, with the Soviets claiming to stand for "peace" and the United States for "freedom."³¹ The

important role of the Red Scare in informing the civil rights movement's reaction to the Vietnam War elevates long-term historical factors to the forefront of the analysis lending efficacy to the utility of the long civil rights movement.

THE RIVERSIDE SPEECH AND THE LONG CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Jacqueline Dowd Hall and others have argued that the civil rights movement originated as far back as the 1930s with a biracial alliance in the South among labor union activists who were seeking an economic and political restructuring of the nation.³² These proponents of the "long civil rights movement" have argued that it serves as a necessary corrective to the New Right's attempt to appropriate the civil rights struggle as a mere effort to achieve a "color-blind" society, glossing over the more radical aims of the movement, such as King's attacks on American capitalism and imperialism. A number of scholars have raised legitimate questions about the merits of the long civil rights movement, particularly its "ahistorical totalizing perspective," its exaggeration of the potency of "civil rights unionism," and the viability of reforming the economic system; however, the long civil rights movement highlights how the struggle for black equality in the 1960, in this case, the polarizing debates over the Vietnam War, did not emerge *sui generis*.³³ It also underscores how the severing of the African American freedom movement from its anticolonial moorings informed the civil rights movement's acrimonious debates over the Vietnam War between 1965 and 1968.

Given the salience of the Cold War, this focus on the so-called long civil rights movement has generated a host of studies on the connection between foreign affairs and the fight for domestic racial reform. The Cold War and the civil rights movement shared a common chronology and "mutually reinforcing ideological and political contexts."³⁴ In her groundbreaking work on the Cold War's impact on the civil rights movement, historian Mary L. Dudziak asserts that "civil rights reform was *in part* a product of the Cold War."³⁵ Although a number of discontinuities and ruptures in American life lend credence to claims that the long civil rights movement is an ahistorical vampire, the Cold War provides a long-term structural factor that explains African American perceptions of foreign affairs. The commotion over King's mixing of civil

rights with foreign affairs in the spring of 1967 underscores the interconnectedness between the Cold War and the civil rights movement.

The larger question of the Cold War's effect on the trajectory of the civil rights movement is an ongoing historiographical debate, and King's Riverside speech provides an important moral. As early as 1984, Manning Marable claimed that the Cold War "had a devastating effect upon the cause of blacks' civil rights and civil liberties," and had the Cold War not occurred, the "democratic upsurge of black people which characterized the late 1950s could have happened ten years earlier."³⁶ Marable's counterfactual claim is a bit far-fetched. A number of scholars have taken a more measured approach, arguing that the Cold War and the accompanying Red Scare narrowed the parameters of dissent by taking issues of economic justice, human rights, and peace off the table in exchange for piecemeal progress on civil rights. This thesis has been advanced in the works of Carol Anderson, Penny Von Eschen, Brenda Gayle Plummer, Nikhil Pal Singh, Risa L. Goluboff, and Robbie Liebermann. In support, they claim that the Red Scare occasioned a vigorous crackdown against the African American Left, thereby destroying the organizations, individuals, and institutions best equipped to mobilize the masses on behalf of human rights, economic justice, and world peace.³⁷ The enervation of the peace wing of the civil rights movement goes far in explaining King's relative isolation when he excoriated U.S. military aggression in Vietnam.

In contrast, other historians, such as Dudziak, Thomas Borstelmann, Jonathan Rosenberg, and Michael Krenn, and sociologist Jonathan Skrentny have pointed out how the United States' concern with promoting a positive image in its public relations campaign against the Soviet Union helped spur the end of segregation.³⁸ To be sure, these pioneering works illustrate policy-makers' sensitivity to the hypocrisy of segregation, and especially how the embarrassing and discriminatory treatment of nonwhite diplomats from newly independent countries pressured American presidents to address the issue of civil rights. The notion that the Cold War was beneficial for civil rights minimizes the impact of grass-roots organizing as a catalyst for civil rights legislation.³⁹ While Marable overstates the case, and prospects for restructuring the economic order were chimerical, the civil rights movement's alliance with Cold War liberalism exacted a cost. Perhaps the largest casualty was the freedom struggle's previous alliance with

anti-imperialism and anticolonialism and the movements ensuing schism over the Vietnam War.

BEFORE THE COLD WAR: AFRICAN AMERICAN
ANTICOLONIALISM IN THE 1930S AND 1940S

King's Riverside speech was redolent of the anticolonial and anti-imperial ideology common among African American intellectuals and political activists in the 1930s and 1940s. His attack on Cold War orthodoxy hearkened back to an earlier consensus that racism at home was inextricably linked to issues of colonialism and imperialism abroad. While King's allies in the civil rights movement regarded his words as naïve and unpatriotic, if he had spoken them in the 1930s or 1940s, the belief in the international dimensions of the freedom struggle would have placed King's views on the Vietnam War in the mainstream.

Until the onset of the Cold War, African American intellectuals and activists were imbued with this anti-imperialist and anticolonial mind-set that mirrored King's views of Vietnam as a racist war. The past generation has witnessed a spate of historiography on international perspectives of the civil rights movement.⁴⁰ For African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s, the continent of Africa, not Asia, grabbed their attention.⁴¹ Over the past twenty years, historians Robin D.G. Kelley, William R. Scott, and Joseph Harris have observed that the Italo-Ethiopian War was the critical event that furnished an international sensibility to African Americans' struggles for racial justice at home.⁴² This is not surprising given that African Americans had long venerated the kingdom of Ethiopia as "the spiritual fatherland of Negroes throughout the world" and as a symbol of black power and black pride.⁴³ Ella Baker imbibed this Pan-African current during her years as a young activist in Harlem in the 1930s. She later became "Godmother" to legions of SNCC activists in the 1960s, and her views of the racist nature of the Vietnam War originated in the furor over the Ethiopian issue, inspiring a new generation of young activists who would revive the freedom struggles' frayed links to anticolonialism.⁴⁴

By the late 1930s, African Americans' increasing engagement in global events occurred against the chilling backdrop of war in Europe. Unable to fathom the extent and scope of the horrors of Hitler's eventual designs, African Americans' animus was still largely directed

against the moribund British and French Empires.⁴⁵ In 1938, Trinidadian Pan-African writer George Padmore evoked the prevailing wrath of British imperialism shared by many African American leaders, but it was also applicable to their opposition to French colonialism in Indochina:

Today the name of England is one of scorn and derision in the market places of Africa and the bazaars of India. British democracy! Why, the very words stink in the nostrils of every coloured subject in the Empire. Those who talk of honour and England will have a big job to retrieve this "honour" and win back the confidence of blacks!⁴⁶

The past generation of scholarship has deepened our understanding of the intensity of African Americans' view of racism as a global phenomenon that was present throughout World War II and in its immediate aftermath. It has been well-documented that most African Americans embraced the "Double V" campaign as their primary rationale for supporting the war: victory against the fascist menace abroad and victory against Jim Crow and racism at home. Richard Dalfume and Kimberley L. Phillips have noted that World War II attuned blacks to the irony of fighting a war for the four freedoms against an enemy preaching a master race ideology, while facing racial segregation and white supremacy at home.⁴⁷ By the end of war, *Negro Digest* polls indicated that although African Americans doubted the war would eradicate racism, they believed it would help create a more equitable world order.⁴⁸ Even NAACP Executive Director Walter White, who was no flaming radical, and later jumped on the Cold War bandwagon, famously rhapsodized about a rising wind of freedom that would allow "the have-nots in the world to share in the benefits of freedom and prosperity, which the haves of the earth have tried to keep for themselves."⁴⁹ This confidence was buoyed by President Franklin Roosevelt's loathing of colonialism, which he articulated in his Atlantic Charter and expressed most succinctly in his March 1941 speech before the White House Correspondents' Association: "There has never been, and there isn't now, and there will never be, any race of people on earth fit to serve as masters over their fellow men. . . We believe any nationality, no matter how small, has the inherent right to its own nationhood."⁵⁰ At the Tehran Conference in December 1943, FDR needled Churchill over colonial issues and

declared that he “was 100% in agreement with Marshall Stalin. . .that France should not get back Indochina.” He grouched, “After 100 years of French rule in Indochina, the inhabitants were worse off than before.”⁵¹ Roosevelt’s death cast a dark shadow over this push for a new world order, but African Americans and their leaders still yearned for a postwar world where colonialism, racism, and imperialism would be relegated to the dustbin of history.

THE EMERGING COLD WAR ZEITGEIST

In the weeks after FDR’s death, the civil rights leadership turned its attention to San Francisco where the United Nations Conference on International Organization (UNCIO) was set to convene to establish the framework for the United Nations. As the leading African American organization, the NAACP had lobbied for and been granted an invitation from the State Department to work as a consultant organization at the UNCIO.⁵² For the African American leadership, this opportunity to help frame the United Nations Charter provided a unique opportunity to strike a blow at the international color line.⁵³ The *Chicago Defender* typified blacks’ expectations of a new postwar order when it concluded that African Americans and colored peoples throughout the world could not expect massive change immediately, but they could anticipate the eventual liberation of colored peoples as “San Francisco will set the temper of the times to come.”⁵⁴

Within months, African Americans’ optimism about the prospect of a new world order quickly succumbed to the reality of power politics and the looming crisis with the Soviet Union in Poland and Eastern Europe.⁵⁵ The new President, Harry S Truman, took a more belligerent approach to the Soviet Union and would backpedal from Roosevelt’s views on decolonization.⁵⁶ In the immediate aftermath of the UNCIO, there was a palpable disappointment of the African American press, which universally condemned the ambitions of the imperial powers and their lack of interest in colonial issues.⁵⁷ The status of the African American delegation as merely advisors to the State Department was another bad omen, which led Walter White to decry their presence as nothing more than “window dressing.”⁵⁸ The American foreign policy establishment believed the reconstruction of the global economy was paramount and should supersede the project of colonial emancipation; it was intent on propping up moribund

colonial regimes, such as the French in South-East Asia, to act as a buffer against the Soviet Union.⁵⁹ After the conference adjourned, Rayford Logan, an African American historian at Howard University, and one of the most visible blacks writing on colonial issues, castigated the new United Nations as a “tragic joke.”⁶⁰

This disappointment over the UN notwithstanding, for the next few years, the African American leadership persisted in their determination to expose racism and all its ramifications on the international stage. Until the late 1940s, African Americans and the civil rights leadership looked askance at the escalating crisis with the Soviet Union and continued to insist that racism, not communism, posed the greatest menace to democracy. For instance, after Prime Minister Winston Churchill delivered his famous “Iron Curtain” speech on March 6, 1946, the *Chicago Defender* editorialized that Britain was now hiding behind the United States’ military power to “maintain [its] iron dominion over India, Africa, and other colonies densely populated by darker peoples.”⁶¹

Following the announcement of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan in 1947, the conflicts that had erupted at Yalta solidified into the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. For American policymakers, “peace” now meant an unprecedented peacetime militarization to contain the Soviet Union. Under the leadership of congressman John Rankin, a rabid segregationist from Mississippi, the House Un-American Activities Committee began to pursue black radicalism, and the conflation of civil rights with communism subversion began in earnest.⁶² As early as 1946, liberal historian and cold warrior Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., had published a story in Henry Luce’s anticommunist *Life* magazine in which he leveled unsubstantiated accusations that the American Communist party was attempting to “sink its tentacle” into the NAACP, the most mainstream civil rights organization.⁶³

The civil rights leadership could not elude this new environment and began to retreat from anticolonialism and embrace the Cold War. This increasingly repressive climate similarly impacted the mainstream African American press’s willingness to question American foreign policy. John H. Sengstacke, editor and publisher of the *Chicago Defender*, the nation’s largest black newspaper, joined Schlesinger in forming the liberal anticommunist Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) which led to editorial changes in the paper’s coverage of foreign affairs.⁶⁴ The African American press

was one of the initial casualties. Anticolonial journalists such as George Padmore disappeared, and the circulation of the leading black papers plummeted.⁶⁵ Penny Von Eschen has cogently argued that by the late 1940s, the broad anticolonial alliance would be one of the earliest casualties of the Cold War.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, in the name of anticommunism, the United States pledged millions of dollars in aid to the French in support of their attempt to recolonize Vietnam. This marked the beginning of the United States' long and tragic involvement with Vietnam.

This atmosphere made the NAACP leadership nervous. The NAACP was the most influential and effective civil rights organization, and it had deep ties to the liberal political establishment. As a result, by about 1948, Walter White and the NAACP jettisoned their anticolonial rhetoric and embraced the ascendant liberal anticommunism.⁶⁷ White's reversal was clear when he declared that the NAACP should focus on rectifying racism in Mississippi, and not Nigeria.⁶⁸ White eventually dismissed his long-time nemesis W.E.B. Du Bois from the NAACP because of disagreements on foreign policy. Prominent civil rights leaders Mary McLeod Bethune, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Council on African Affairs co-founder Max Yergan were some of the other black activists who joined the anticommunist brigade and jumped on the Cold War bandwagon.

By 1948, the few remaining black dissenters who rejected the emerging Cold War consensus coalesced around the quixotic presidential campaign of former vice president Henry A. Wallace. Wallace's candidacy was noteworthy because it marked the last gasp by an established political figure (until 1968) to seek the nation's highest office and question Cold War orthodoxy.⁶⁹ Support from communists and "fellow travelers" elicited howls of protests and red-baiting from Wallace's opponents, but his exhortations for an immediate end to segregation and Jim Crow laws in the South inspired enthusiasm from the most militant African Americans, who were tired of Truman and the Democratic Party's compromises with its reactionary southern wing. Wallace's pluck, however, failed to earn him the support of the influential NAACP hierarchy, which was leery of the role of the Communist Party and fellow travelers in the Progressive Party and supported Truman in violation of the Association's nonpartisan policy.⁷⁰ Although the African American press and many of the eligible African American voters in the North were sympathetic to Wallace, they voted overwhelmingly for Truman. The final tally indicated that Wallace

received only 2.38 percent of the total of vote, and only 10 percent of the African American vote.⁷¹

Truman's upset victory in the 1948 presidential election marked the triumph of Cold War liberalism, an ideology centered on Arthur Schlesinger's idea of the Vital Center: the marriage of the New Deal state and aggressive anticommunist foreign policy.⁷² The prospects for challenging the United States' support of imperial allies, such as the France's attempt to reassert its colonial empire in Indochina, suffered a major setback when the Red Scare, which had begun with Truman's loyalty oath, reached a feverish pitch in February 1950 McCarthyism. The outbreak of the Korean War a few months later buttressed this repressive atmosphere characterized by fear and conformity. It would have been an act of folly for African Americans to challenge the government's policies during wartime in this hysterical climate.

Because they were a vulnerable minority viewed with suspicion, and, in many cases, derision, African Americans were targeted and more susceptible to the red-baiting that destroyed so many individuals and organizations.⁷³ For their forthright criticisms of U.S. foreign policy, Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois were two notable African Americans who became victims of government repression. Robeson even waded into the thicket of the Vietnam issue by chiding African American leaders for their silence about this colonial struggle by "twenty-three million brown-skinned people" in Indochina.⁷⁴ While the ongoing war against French imperialism was hardly a salient event for most African Americans in the early 1950s, Robeson's prescient musings would wrack the civil rights movement and the rest of the country a decade later. Du Bois and Robeson were the most prominent victims of government repression against the African American Left, and their travails have been well-documented, but they were not alone. Robeson's wife, Eslanda Goode Robeson, W. Alphaeus Hunton, Jr., journalist Charlotta Bass, Lorraine Hansberry, and Langston Hughes were some of the influential African American intellectuals, activists, and artists who spoke out on behalf of peace and against U.S. Cold War policies that conflicted with their vision of racism as a global phenomenon. The repressive era of the early Cold War tolerated no deviation from political orthodoxy. This persecution of the African American left in the late 1940s and early 1950s created a political void, and when Cold War climate began to thaw, the few

African Americans willing to speak out against U.S. foreign policy confront this slightly changed milieu in a vacuum.

COLD WAR CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE LIMITS OF BLACK PACIFISM
(1954–1967)

As the country slowly crept out of the haze of McCarthyism in early 1954, the Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (which roughly coincided with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu) seemed to validate the NAACP's campaign of combating Jim Crow through litigation and lobbying. At this triumphant moment, the merits of the association's embrace of Cold War liberalism and the renunciation of its previous anticolonial rhetoric seemed unassailable. The wisdom of the NAACP's strategy of embracing Cold War liberalism was reified by the State Department's filing of an amicus brief in support of *Brown*, and its arguments that that segregation compromised the nation's Cold War objectives.⁷⁵

Despite the diminution of the extreme anticommunist hysteria after 1954, the mainstream civil rights movement maintained its policy of eschewing criticism of U.S. Cold War policy in exchange for incremental gains at home. The death of Stalin and the demise of Senator Joseph McCarthy did not eliminate the civil rights movement's reluctance to venture into the troubled waters of foreign policy. The hegemony of the Cold War zeitgeist provided continuity. Robeson's jeremiads against the French in Vietnam were anomalous and incited condemnation. For example, Bayard Rustin excoriated Robeson and reminded blacks of the "unwritten rule that 'we have to prove we are patriotic.'"⁷⁶ Black journalist Eugene Gordon's series of columns criticizing U.S. foreign policy and linking freedom and colonialism had difficulty finding an audience, "demonstrating how criticism of U.S. foreign policy had become anathema in the political culture of the 1950s."⁷⁷ Opponents of U.S. Cold War policy had to tread lightly. William Worthy, a black journalist and World War II conscientious objector, was another aberration. Worthy published a slew of articles in the *Baltimore Afro-American* and *Crisis* questioning American imperial designs in Asia and Africa. Only weeks before the French surrendered to the Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu, Worthy branded the war in Vietnam a racist, "dirty war," and called it "a potential colonial prelude to a World War III of color."⁷⁸ Worthy's warnings about the racial implications of American foreign policy in African and Asia also

fell on deaf ears, and his broadsides against U.S. Cold War policy in Asia earned the enmity of the federal government. A few years later in 1957, his passport was revoked after he returned from China where he had interviewed Chou En-lai, and in the early 1960s, he became the first American citizen jailed for flouting the government's prohibition against traveling to Cuba.⁷⁹ It was in this repressive context that young Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement would have to contend with the issue of United States foreign policy. Until President Johnson escalated the Vietnam War in early 1965, only the most radical individuals on the fringes of the civil rights movement dared venture into the treacherous shoals of American Cold War policy.

The emergence of twenty-six-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr., in the forefront of the freedom struggle in December 1955 marked an important milestone. In contrast to Roy Wilkins and others in the civil rights hierarchy who embraced the Cold War and abhorred Pan-Africanism, King perceived the battle against segregation as part of a global struggle against colonialism and racism.⁸⁰ In the early days of the Montgomery bus boycott, the young minister spoke of the black freedom struggle as "part of [an] overall movement in the world in which oppressed people are revolting against imperialism and colonialism."⁸¹ The next year, King traveled outside the United States for the first time in his life to attend Ghana's independence ceremony. His trip to Africa and his talks with Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah made a profound impression on King, and he remarked, "there is no basic difference between colonialism and racial segregation."⁸² Two years later, he went to India, the home of Gandhi, where he encountered the problem of massive poverty and became better acquainted with the notion of Third World nonalignment, an idea that had come to fruition at the Bandung Conference in 1955. The hegemonic Cold War mind-set that the developing world was merely a pawn in the irrepressible rivalry between the two superpowers struck King as arrogant, racist, and blind to historical forces and native culture. King would express this view in his Riverside speech, and his long-standing antipathy to colonialism and imperialism would inform his critique of U.S. Cold War policy in South-East Asia. As the titular head of the national civil rights movement, King was so preoccupied with the crusade to end segregation that he did not incorporate his view of foreign affairs into his programmatic campaign for peace and justice.

In the early 1960s, the birth of SNCC and a rejuvenation of CORE, which sponsored the Freedom Rides, ignited a revolutionary grassroots movement comprising predominately young African Americans in the South. A decade younger than King and part of the New Left, these young activists were liberated from the internal debates over Marxists dogma that had devastated the anticolonial activists of the 1930s and 1940s. They were intent on transcending the narrow prism of Cold War America and were more willing to question the shibboleths of the Cold War. The nation's fixation on communism in places such as Vietnam was risible to SNCC activists, who would endure months of terror as they waged war against Jim Crow in the Deep South. SNCC executive director and air force veteran James Forman typified this sentiment: "We decided that the so-called fights of the Thirties and Forties were not our fights, although some tried to impose them on us."⁸³ Instead of sidling away from their anticolonial predecessors Robeson and Du Bois, these younger activists sought to resuscitate their critiques of American imperialism and preached a similar vision of the interrelatedness of racism at home and imperialism abroad. SNCC's policy of not excluding Communists would precipitate red-baiting from its segregationist enemies. Although King admired the youthful moxie of these activists and shared their sentiments, he was less inclined to venture into foreign policy, and he worried that SNCC's forthright criticisms of American institutions and foreign policy would furnish its segregationist foes with more ammunition in their ongoing attempts to tarnish the civil rights movement as a communist-inspired plot. The onset of the Vietnam War finally forced the civil rights movement to reckon with U.S. Cold War policy. In the mid-1960s, however, SNCC's critiques were an outlier.

The radical wing of the civil rights movement first expressed its opposition to the Vietnam War during Freedom Summer in 1964. On the same day that LBJ announced the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the bodies of the three slain civil rights workers were discovered in Mississippi.⁸⁴ SNCC activists took note of the disparity between the federal government's passivity in the face of violence against civil rights workers in the South and the alacrity with which it sent troops to South-East Asia thousands of miles away. SNCC historian Clayborne Carson noted, "Most SNCC workers opposed U.S. involvement in Vietnam as soon as they became aware of it."⁸⁵ At a memorial service for the three slain civil rights workers in August 1964, historian Howard Zinn recalled that SNCC leader Robert Moses held a copy of the

morning newspaper with the headline "'LBJ Says Shoot to Kill in the Gulf of Tonkin,' and he castigated a government that refused to protect civil rights workers but was ready to send its armed forces half-way around the world for a cause nobody could reasonably explain."⁸⁶ SNCC's bitterness surrounding the Democratic Party's failure to seat the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) delegation in Atlantic City fueled more skepticism about the merits of liberalism. As LBJ made the fateful decision to escalate the war in late 1964 and early 1965, many SNCC leaders likened the murders of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney to the napalm bombing of objects in Vietnam.⁸⁷

Throughout 1965, SNCC engaged in a number of contentious internal debates over whether it should come out against the Vietnam War, which was eclipsing civil rights as the preeminent issue on the nation's agenda.⁸⁸ In contrast to King and the NAACP, the SNCC community was not immune from the human cost of the war, and by the spring of 1965, the Vietnam War had become personal to them. In July 1965, a young Mississippian John Shaw, who had been involved in the demonstrations in McComb back in 1961, was killed in Vietnam. The news of his death sparked a protest among the African American community in Mississippi.⁸⁹ The MFDP circulated a leaflet listing five compelling reasons why African Americans should not be fighting in Vietnam and advocated draft resistance, which sparked a fusillade of red-baiting.⁹⁰ Most individual SNCC members opposed the war, but SNCC leaders John Lewis, Dona Richards, and Mitchell Zimmerman were among those who harbored reservations about SNCC's public opposition to the war because it would lead to even more red-baiting and erode their already weakened fund-raising efforts.⁹¹

This intractable anticommunism was a major factor in SNCC's decision not to come out against the war in 1965. The beleaguered organization already had enough difficulties. Its policy of not excluding Communists elicited a slew of red-baiting from the mainstream press. *Washington Post* columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak wrote a series of articles tarring SNCC with unsubstantiated allegations of communist infiltration. Days after the heralded march from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965, Evans and Novak spuriously stated, "There is no doubt that SNCC is substantially infiltrated by beatnik left-wing revolutionaries, and—worst of all—by Communists." They went on to say, "SNCC and its leaders aren't really

interested in the right to vote or any other attainable goal, but in demanding the unattainable as a means of provoking social turmoil.”⁹² A few weeks later, they alleged that the National Lawyers Guild’s involvement in the MFDP’s legal affairs combined with SNCC’s long-standing ties to “leftist” Ella Baker proved that “it would be a miracle if Communists had not attached themselves to SNCC.”⁹³ The *New York Post*’s James Weschler chimed in and warned, “militants are staging an uprising against the major civil rights blocs...encouraged by a fragment of Communists (Chinese rather than Russian in orientation).”⁹⁴

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee worker and military veteran Sammy Younge, Jr., was murdered on January 3, 1966, in Tuskegee, Alabama for using a whites-only restroom. This proved to be the last straw. SNCC became the first civil rights organization to oppose the Vietnam War. Three days after the murder, SNCC executive director John Lewis read a statement: “The murder of Samuel Younge in Tuskegee, Alabama, is no different than the murder of Vietnamese peasants, for both Younge and the Vietnamese are seeking to secure the rights guaranteed them by law.” Lewis went on to state that SNCC’s “role was not to fight in Vietnam, but [to fight] here in this country for freedoms [that African Americans] are denied” at home.⁹⁵

Foreshadowing the reaction to King’s Riverside speech the following year, SNCC’s broadside against the war generated widespread hostility. The reaction was so intense that Alabama’s selective service director announced that he was considering a review of SNCC executive director John Lewis’s draft status.⁹⁶ Not surprisingly, the NAACP immediately distanced itself from SNCC’s attack on the war, and the African American *Atlanta Daily World* condemned Lewis’s statements as “most deplorable, misleading, and incorrect.”⁹⁷ The moderate *Atlanta Journal* opened a full-scale assault on SNCC, observing “its policy treads far beyond dissent and doubt about policy,” implying that SNCC’s policy was treasonous.⁹⁸ The furor over SNCC’s antiwar statement reached a crescendo after its former communications director, Julian Bond, was denied his seat in the Georgia legislature when he concurred with SNCC’s view that civil rights activity represented a viable alternative to the draft. The political establishment pilloried Bond, and Lieutenant Governor Peter Zack Geer spoke for the majority of white Georgians when he called Bond’s statement “a total, glaring, and sad example of a total lack of patriotism to the United States

of America. Wittingly or unwittingly, this position exactly suits the Kremlin."⁹⁹

It was in this turbulent environment that King was forced to reckon with the Vietnam War, which was wreaking havoc on the Great Society and imperiling further civil rights legislation. King was no stranger to red-baiting. David Garrow has documented the FBI's ongoing investigation of King and the trail of internal memoranda warning that he was a target of communist infiltration.¹⁰⁰ From 1963 until the end of his life, King was continuously under FBI surveillance, and director J. Edgar Hoover was obsessed with destroying the civil rights leader.¹⁰¹ As early as March 1965, after King had expressed his initial misgivings about the growing crisis in Vietnam, Hoover sent a report to White House assistant Marvin Watson, which was passed on to the president. The report included details of a wiretapped conversation between King's two advisors in which one had said, "It is a mockery to talk about freedom in South Vietnam when the one man who is defending [freedom] in Selma is in jeopardy."¹⁰² This memorandum and other reports of King's early statements against U.S. militarism in Vietnam, especially his intention to undertake a letter-writing campaign to the relevant national leaders and call for a cease-fire, fed LBJ's legendary paranoia.¹⁰³ In a telephone conversation after the Watts riots in August, the president warned King that he "better not leave the impression that you are against me in Vietnam."¹⁰⁴ In an attempt to defuse a possible crisis, Johnson proposed that King meet with UN ambassador Arthur Goldberg to discuss what was going on behind the scenes to effectuate a settlement in Vietnam. King's antiwar utterances in the summer of 1965 caused an irate Johnson to have proxies criticize King. In a veiled reference to King, George Weaver, the African American assistant secretary of labor, warned that "criticisms of America's policy in Vietnam by civil rights groups could lead the Communists to make disastrous miscalculations in American determination."¹⁰⁵ Circumstances had changed so dramatically that by the mid-1960s the conscience of the nation could no longer tolerate segregation; however, African Americans who opposed United States Cold War policy still had to tread lightly.

Following his meeting with Ambassador Goldberg at the United Nations on September 10, 1965, King reiterated his plea for the U.S. government to negotiate with the Vietcong. Then, in an offhand remark, he made the unpardonable suggestion that it was time for the United Nations to recognize Red China.¹⁰⁶ Not surprisingly,

King's statement on Red China provoked a firestorm and the White House and its allies smelled blood. Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut, a staunch ally of the President and one of the Senate's strongest supporters of J. Edgar Hoover, suggested that King's proposed letter-writing campaign violated the Logan Act, which made it a crime for a private individual to carry out foreign policy.¹⁰⁷ Whitney Young, Jr., spoke for the civil rights establishment when he accused King of doing a "disservice" to the civil rights movement by linking it to Vietnam.¹⁰⁸ The ferocity of these attacks shook King and wiretapped conversations between King and his aides recorded his plaintive acknowledgment that he "must forget the peace issue and get back to civil rights." He noted that his enemies "will take the Communist China thing and what Dodd said and use it to say that I am under the influence of the Communists which may confuse some of our supporters and contributors."¹⁰⁹ For the next year, King brooded over the spiraling war and confined his criticisms of Vietnam to his pulpit and the black press, well outside the spotlight.

King remained silent on the issue of the war following the brouhaha accompanying SNCC's public opposition to the war and the Julian Bond controversy in January 1966, but he bristled at a society that equated dissent to treason. In a sermon to his Ebenezer Baptist Church congregation, he preached that nonconformity and dissent represented the true essence of Christianity, and he likened Julian Bond to Ralph Waldo Emerson.¹¹⁰ King's curious silence on the war provoked much wonder and consternation among the burgeoning peace movement, which yearned for a leader of King's stature to lend it credibility and negate the perception that it was largely composed of Vietniks and beatniks. King had good reason to be cautious. Throughout the end of 1965 and 1966, the peace movement was still perceived as anti-American. A Harris poll commissioned by *Newsweek* indicated that only 18 percent of blacks favored a unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam.¹¹¹ Another Harris poll taken in April 1966 found that four of ten Americans were unfavorably disposed toward civil rights groups that opposed the Vietnam War, and they were less inclined to favor civil rights for African Americans when a civil rights group came out against the war.¹¹²

By the beginning of 1967, King's revulsion against the spiraling war caused him to override the advice of his closest aides who implored him to keep his distance from the antiwar movement.¹¹³ On January 14, King experienced an epiphany of sorts when he picked up the latest

edition of *Ramparts* magazine, which contained an article titled the "Children of Vietnam," accompanied by twenty-four photographs of Vietnamese babies who had been mutilated by American napalm bombs.¹¹⁴ The pictures sickened him, and after months of vacillation, these searing photographs set King over the edge. For months, King had been losing the hearts and minds of young black men. How could the foremost exponent of nonviolence be silent in the face of the wanton carnage in South-East Asia? He expected that his assault against the Vietnam War to provoke hostility from the liberal establishment, but its venomous nature staggered him. King intimates Dorothy Cotton and Andrew Young observed that these attacks plunged him into a major depression that persisted until his assassination the following year.¹¹⁵ Nonetheless, days after the Riverside speech a relieved King confessed to Stanley Levison, "I was probably politically unwise but will not agree that I was morally unwise . . . I think I have a role to play which may be unpopular."¹¹⁶ The moral clarity and courage of King's speech marked his finest hour, and his preeminent stature helped turn the tide of black opinion against the Vietnam War.¹¹⁷

King's meandering path from civil rights leader to antiwar spokesman and the furor over the Riverside speech are instructive. They underscore the civil rights movement's deep-seated fear of attacking Cold War policy and thereby appearing unpatriotic. In an analysis of the Vietnam War's polarizing impact on black America and the civil rights coalition, the persistence of the Cold War landscape militates against criticisms that the long civil rights movement collapses periodization schemes and is ahistorical. Scholars of the long civil rights movement have emphasized the Cold War's impact in purging black pacifists from the movement and severing the peace movement from the freedom movement. The spate of scholarship on the demise of the broad-based anticolonial movement in the late 1940s has relevance to how the civil rights movement grappled and then foundered over the explosive issue of the Vietnam War in the 1960s. More than any other event, the Vietnam War fractured the civil rights coalition, destabilized the postwar liberal consensus, and helped pave the way for the rise of conservatism. Despite its unparalleled accomplishment in toppling segregation, the Vietnam War helped destroy the vision LBJ announced in his Howard University commencement speech of taking steps to end the cycle of poverty. Recent challenges to the Voting Rights Act and new restrictions on eligibility are the most obvious examples of the effects of LBJ's failure to shore up civil rights with additional

legislation and other remedial measures to rectify the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. By the late 1960s, the civil rights movement was one of the many casualties of the Vietnam War.

NOTES

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