

## The Meaning of Dr. King's Life and Death

**Transcript of a Commentary by Ambrose I. Lane, Sr.  
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This day is a very important day in the history of this country. Thirty-nine years ago today, April 4th, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. When he was assassinated there was a military hit team in Memphis, and to this date no one has explained what they were doing there. Forty years ago today, Dr. King made his speech that many of us believe led to his assassination. So today we're gonna talk a little bit about the meaning of Dr. King's life and death in this country.

Less than a year before he made his fateful speech at the Riverside Church on April 4th 1967, Dr. King these words. He said:

"Even though we gained legislative and judicial victories, these did very little to improve the lot of millions of Negroes in teeming ghettos of the north. In fact, the changes that came about during this period were at best surface changes because the roots of racism are very deep in America. Our society is still structured on the basis of racism. What we see now in a sense in the counter-revolution taking place. What happens in the revolution is, when the hopes are blasted those who built up the hopes are often the target of the bitter criticism precisely because they could not deliver."

These were remarks Dr. King made on November 13, 1966. A month later on December 15, 1966, Dr. King testified before the US Senate's Government Operation Committee chaired then by US Senator Abraham Ribbencoff, Conn. Dr. King said:

"Our goal is not to bring the discriminated up to a limited particular level but to reduce the gap between them and the rest of American society. We cannot peg the poor at the old levels of subsistence. I am convinced that the simplest approach will prove to be the most revolutionary. The solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a rather now widely discussed measure, the Guaranteed Annual Income. The attainment of security and equality for Negroes has not yet become a serious and irrevocable national purpose. I doubt that there ever was a sincere commitment to this end. Large segments of white society are more concerned about the tranquility and status quo than about justice and humanity. Because the issues that we confront are the hard core economic issues."

These words were spoken before the US Senate's Government Operations Committee.

And then in one of earliest assertions of pain over what he saw as his "I have a Dream" speech, Dr. King said these words:

"We raised the hopes tremendously, but we were not really able to really produce the dream and the results inherit in that Hope. We leaders lifted the Hope but we were not able to produce. The result, expressions by the poor and disaffected in violence of the deep despair and deep frustration and the deep sense of alienation that was their daily lives."

By this time in his life Dr. King had reached the fateful decision to, in his words, "go all out' in publicly opposing the Vietnam War. He'd confided to close a friend that, and I quote:

"At times you do things to satisfy your conscious and they may be all together unrealistic or wrong tactically. I know I'll get a lot criticism and I know it'll hurt SCLC." But he said that the war had become to evil to him that "I can no longer be cautious about this matter." He said that "I feel so dep in my heart that we are so wrong in this country and the time has come for a real prophecy and I willing to go that road."

But he found out that his organization was not willing to support his stand. As one SCLC board member said

"The argument went that if this is what Martin wants to do, it's alright for Martin to do it if he understand what he's doing. But I don't understand it and I'm not going out there with him."

A few days later Dr. King journeyed to New York to address the clergy and laymen concerned about Vietnam at the historic Riverside church. It was April 4th, 1967, exactly one year to the date of his assassination. That speech and the courageous 12 months that would follow sealed his fate. As he told the assembled crowd he was full accord with their opening lines of their statement that "... a time comes when silence is betrayal." After a devastating analysis he had given of the dishonorable actions of our government, he called on the nation's clergymen and churches to, and I quote:

"Urge our government to disengage itself from a disgraceful commitment. We must continue to raise our voices if our nation persists in it's perverse ways in Vietnam. And as we minister of the gospel counsel young men concerning military service we must clarify for them our nation's role in Vietnam and challenge them with the alternative of Conscientious Objection. I am pleased to say that this is the path now being chosen by more than 70 students at my own Alma Mater, Morehouse College. And I recommend it to all who find the American course in Vietnam a dishonorable and unjust one. Moreover I would encourage all ministers of draft age to give up their ministerial draft exceptions and seek draft status as CO. We are at the moment when our lives must be placed on the line if our nation is to survive its own folly. Every man of humane convictions

must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions but we must all protest."

And in prophetic words Dr. King called the Vietnam War ".Only a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit and if we ignore this sobering reality we will find ourselves organizing clergy, and laymen, concerned committees for the next generation about Guatemala and Peru, about Thailand and Cambodia, about Mozambique and South Africa."

Dr. King then quoted an American official who charged that American was on the wrong side of a world revolution.

Dr. King said:

"Increasingly this is the role that our nation has taken, the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments. I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of world revolution we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A true revolution of values would lay hands on the world order and say of war 'This way of settling differences is not just.' This business of burning human beings with Napalm, or filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, or injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of people normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged can not be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after to year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is a approaching spiritual death."

Dr. King concluded:

" A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalty must become ecumenical and not sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in our individual societies. This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond ones tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all embracing and unconditional love for all men. This oft misunderstood and misinterpreted concept, so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force, is now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man. I am speaking of that force which all the great religions as seen as the supreme, unifying principle of life. LOVE is somehow the key that unlocks the door, which leads to

ultimate reality. This Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist believe about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of St. John: "Let us love one another, for Love is of God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knows God. He that loveth not knoweth not God for God is Love. If we love one another than God dwelleth in us and his love is perfected in us."

Dr. King said,

"Now, let us begin. Let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter but beautiful struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the children of God and our brothers and sisters wait eagerly for our response."

Well, the response of the minions of the ruling class in this country was instantaneous and harsh. Two days after the speech, *The Washington Post* falsely accused Dr. King of spreading, and I quote, "Shear inventions of unsupported fantasy and conveying bitter and damaging allegations and inferences that he did not and could not document."

*The Post*, which has posed itself as a liberal newspaper, then concluded that Dr. King, and I quote, "Has a done a grave injury to those who are his natural allies and an even graver injury to himself. Many who have listened to him with respect will never again accord him the same confidence. He has diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country, and to his people and that is a great tragedy," wrote *The Washington Post*.

*Life* magazine characterized his speech as a, and I quote, "Demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi." End of quote.

And even the blacked-owned *Pittsburgh Courier* charged that he was, "tragically misleading blacks on issues that were too complex for simple debate," whatever that meant.

And *The New York Times* called him "reckless."

And after receiving a call from the White House, black columnist Carl Rowan personally attacked King "shedding crocodile tears" about what Rowan saw as the, quote, "transformation of King from the boycott leader with an uncanny knack for saying the right things into the King of today who has very little sense of or concern for public relations and no tactical skills. The problem," wrote Rowan, "was that," and I quote,

"King is listening most to a man that is clearly more interested in embarrassing the United States than the plight of either the Negro or the war-weary people of Vietnam."

End of quote.

Six days after the speech, the NAACP board passed a resolution calling any attempt to join the Civil Rights movement and the peace movement, quote, “a serious tactical mistake.” The NAACP action was of course reported on the front page of *The New York Times* with a headline on all capital letters reading “NAACP DECRIES STAND OF DR. KING ON VIETNAM.”

And behind the scenes, doing most of this manipulation, was the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover who was telling the President that, quote, “Based on King's recent activities and public utterances it is clear that he is an instrument in the hands of subversive forces seeking to undermine our nation.” End of quote. Referring to so-called Communist ties.

But Dr. King had set himself on a course of courage and truth that he would follow to his death, often alone. Not long after the speech, on a flight to California, he told a reporter, and I quote, “For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of society, a little change here, a little change there. Now, I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values.”

A month and a half after his Riverside speech, he addressed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff during a retreat in South Carolina and this is what he told them. He said,

“We have moved from the era of Civil Rights to the era of Human Rights. An era where we are called upon to raise certain basis questions about the whole society. We have been in a reform movement but after Selma and the voting rights bill we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution. I think we must see the great distinction here between a reform movement and a revolutionary movement. I'm convinced that a lot of people that supported us when we were in those glowing epic-making days in Alabama and Mississippi, when we were in Birmingham and Selma a lot of people who supported us supported us because they were against Jim Clark, because they were against Bull Conner, but they were not for genuine equality for Negroes. We must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power. This means a revolution of values and other things. We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism are all tied together.”

A month and a half after his Vietnam speech at the Riverside Church, Dr. King addressed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff in a retreat in South Carolina and he concluded by telling them that, and I quote,

“You must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power. This means,” he said, “a revolution of values and other things. We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism are all tied together

and you can't get rid of one without getting rid of the others. In short, the whole structure of American life must be changed."

That year, 1967, was a year of riot in New York, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan. Dr. King called on the President and the Congress to deal with the serious economic problems in the nation's slums. In a telegraph to the President he said, and I quote,

"Only drastic changes in the life of the poor will provide the kind of order and stability you desire. The suicidal and irrational acts which plague our streets daily are being sowed and watered by the irrational, irrelevant, and equally suicidal debate and delay in Congress. The most important problem is the lack of jobs for tens of thousands of slum residents. Let us do," he wrote, "one simple direct thing. Let us end unemployment totally and immediately. I propose specifically a creation of a national agency that shall provide a job to every person who needs work. I regret that my expression may be sharp, but I believe literally that the life of our nation is at stake here at home."

As the summer of 1967 came to an end, Dr. King told the SCLC convention, and I quote,

"Our real problem is that there is no disposition by the administration or the Congress to seek fundamental remedies beyond police measures. It was either," he said, "to move a Congress running wild with racism or tactics that would cripple the operations of an oppressive society. Civil disobedience was the only alternative," said Dr. King.

And he told the SCLC convention

"non-violent action in the South was effective because any form of social movement by Negroes upset the status quo. When Negroes merely marched in southern streets it was close to rebellion. In urban communities marches are less disquieting because they are not considered rebellions and secondly because the normal turbulence of cities absorbs them as merely transitory drama which is ordinary in their life. To raise protests to an appropriate level for cities, to invest it with aggressive but non-violent qualities, it is necessary to adopt civil disobedience. To dislocate the functioning of a city without destroying it can be more effective than a riot because it can be longer lasting, costly to the society, but not wantonly destructive. Moreover, it is difficult for government to quell it by superior force."

The planning got underway for what became known as the "poor people's campaign," what Dr. King called

"...a kind of last desperate demand for the nation to respond to non-violence. Now, they might not respond, I can't promise that, but I do

think that we've got to go for broke this time. We've gone for broke before but not in the way we're going this time because if necessary, I'm going to stay in jail. They aren't going to run me out of Washington."

In a press conference he painted a picture of "waves of the nation's poor and disinherited descending on Washington on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1968 and until America responds with specific reform. Until," in his words, "definite and positive action is taken to provide jobs and income for the poor. This will be a move," he said,

Dr. King said,

"...the absolute minimum would be Congressional passage of a full employment commitment, a guaranteed annual income measure, and construction fund for at least 500,000 units of low-income housing."

Citing opinion polls that demonstrated the American peoples supported such measures, Dr. King said, "We are counting on a response from the people of the nation." But his was only a hope as he told the DC Chamber of Commerce, "I don't have any faith in the whites in power responding in the right way." And if worse came to worst, King expressed a belief that such people in power would try to, quote, "treat us like they did our Japanese brothers and sisters in World War II. The Wallaces and the Birchites would take over. The sick people and the fascists will be strengthened but," he told his audience, "we're going to be militant. We're going to plague Congress."

As his date with destiny rapidly approached, Dr. King told an audience of several hundred ministers, he said, "A kind of genocide has been perpetrated against black people. Not physical genocide but psychological and spiritual genocide, a terrible onslaught that had not been fully comprehended in earlier years when we had not evaluated the depth of resistance to real equality. He said,

"When hope diminishes the hate element is often turned against those who originally built up the hope. The bitterness is often great towards that person who built up the hope, who could say, 'I have a dream,' but couldn't produce the dream because the failure and sickness of the nation to respond to the dream."

On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968, an assassin's bullet would end Dr. King's life and doom the poor people's campaign to failure and the poor to invisibility. Even though our nation's streets grow more crowded each year with poor, homeless families and beggars, with humans crippled by what they thought was their service to their country and that this horrible, horrible war in Vietnam, no longer needed by their government for cannon fodder for our war machine that fills the pockets of faceless members of the ruling class, with men and women and children addicted by the dope brought into the country with the criminal knowledge of the FBI and CIA and the planes sent to supply the Contras during the Reagan administration, by the Reagan administration, and returning loaded with dope, off-loading that dope at military bases and selling that dope on America's streets by

propagandizing us to “just say no.” The irrationality on our streets is now full-blown. Not only have the minions of the ruling class supplied the streets with dope; they are now supplying guns and designer bullets. And since Dr. King’s assassination, there has been little talk by anyone about full employment or a guaranteed annual income. And today, as then, Dr. King’s words,

“There is no disposition by the administration or Congress to seek fundamental remedies beyond police measures in responding to the pain and suffering of the American people, especially its poor people.”

The Senate that we have seen since his assassination has been at least as insane as that of 1967. Their only answer to the deep and spreading problems our nation faces is more police, more prisons, more fascist laws, and mandatory sentences, and more laws to put people to death. This is especially true of this White House. Hitler would have been proud of these representatives of the “world’s best hope,”—yeah, that’s what we still call ourselves. But we have become a nation lead by prostitutes, political prostitutes, religiously counseled by right-wing prostitute preachers who tell us to obey corrupt persons in positions of power. We’re daily lied to and propagandized by these leader prostitutes who fill their pockets with our and PAC money and lobbying money while we are told by the religious prostitutes that it is God’s will. It is not God’s will that we prostitute our intelligence by acting like damn fools by believing the lies and passively accepting the increasing horror of our lives and neighborhoods. Acceptance of corrupt government and fascist laws in the name of law and order proposed by those same corrupt political leaders can only prepare us and our children for passive acceptance or insane approval of a fascist government.

That is the awful nightmare that drove Dr. King to lay his life on the line. He was one of the first to use the term “fascist.” It was that awful nightmare that the American people would be duped into welcoming in humanity and fascism through the Democratic process. That is a nightmare that all Americans must see. And we must determine what kind of Americans we will become. Will we remain the kind of Americans that H.L. Mencken saw when he wrote these words? He wrote:

“The men the American people admire most extravagantly are the most daring liars. The men they detest most violently are those who try to tell them the truth.”

Or will we become the kind of Americans Thomas Jefferson hoped white Americans would become? When an armed rebellion broke out in this country while he was in France, Jefferson wrote a friend and said these words in his letter. He said, “I am convinced that those societies such as the Indians which live without government enjoy in their general mass an infinitely greater degree of happiness than those who live under governments like the European governments. Among the former, public opinion is in the place of law and restrains morals as powerfully as law ever did anywhere. Among the latter, the European governments, under pretense of governing, they have divided their nations into two classes, wolves and sheep. Jefferson wrote,

“This is a true picture of Europe. Cherish therefore the spirit of our people and keep alive their intention. Do not be too severe upon their errors but reclaim them by enlightening them. If once they become inattentive to public affairs, you and I and Congress and assemblies, judges and governors shall all become wolves. It seems to be the law of our general nature in spite of individual exceptions and experience declares that man is the only animal which devours his own kind for I can apply no milder term to the governments of Europe and to the general prey of the rich on the poor.”

That is what Enron and all of our nation’s corporate scandals and our Congressional scandals and our Presidential scandals are all about; the prey of the rich on the poor by a cabal of racketeers in corporations and in government paying for the services of politicians in our government.

In Jefferson’s words, our Congress and assemblies and many of our judges and governors have all become wolves. And the people have become sheep, afraid to challenge their legal and illegal theft of our tax dollars. We seem to have forgotten that all elected officials are our employees, not just the weak-kneed flunkies of the rich the corporations.

When Dr. King saw the little Vietnamese girl running and screaming because American napalm had burned all of her clothes off and much of her skin he broke down in tears and determined to do what he could to end that war. And as he traveled our country, witnessing the abject poverty of so many Americans, we talk about third-world conditions—go out of your major cities and you’ll find a whole lot of third-world conditions in the United States of America. And Dr. King saw that. He saw the homelessness increasing daily, in this the richest nation in the history of the world. He set his course to bring thousands and tens of thousands of the poor of all colors to this nation’s capital and he determined not to leave no matter how many days he spent in prison until our employees in Congress and the White House addressed the needs of the poor of this country. That’s why they killed him before he came. That’s why there was a military assassination team that followed him to Memphis, Tennessee and they still have not told us what the hell they were doing there.

Today, as we celebrate this date 40 years when he spoke at the Riverside Church, 39 years when they assassinated him, remember what he said about why his dream was squashed by this country’s ruling class, by their counter-revolution and then teach your children the truth. Teach them to reject the fascists who are now running our government because friendly or compassionate, fascism is still fascism. Teach them that governments are also terrorists—that governmental terrorism is much more viscous and long lasting and kills people not by the hundreds but by the hundreds of thousands and by the millions. That is what Dr. King meant when he sadly said that our government, the government of the United States of America, was the “greatest purveyor of violence on this Earth.” And that’s a direct quote.

Think about that and get involved politically. Every political prostitute must run for re-election in our current system of government. Prepare to vote these prostitutes out of office before they complete the process of turning this country, America, into a full-blown fascist state in the name of fighting a so-called war against terrorism. Flying flags on your car and your house and plastering those "support our troops" ribbons on your cars is not patriotism. Standing up and fighting for our Constitution and our rights under our Bill of Rights and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment are the height and breadth of patriotism. Fight to make sure that habeas corpus is restored in this country and that all of us are told why they have appropriated 386 million dollars to hold "illegals" and quote, "others." And make certain that they stop spying on the American people and opening the mail of the American people and that they stop what they have begun. Four million manufacturing jobs outsourced: the privatization of our jobs. The building of manufacturing plants in Mexico and Canada, and building of a 300 billion dollar plant in China by our corporations and buying all of our steel from outside the country.

That's what we must stop in the name of what Dr. King suffered 39 years ago because of what he said 40 years ago.

This has been Ambrose I. Lane, Sr. with a commentary.