Title of Lesson: Muhammad Ali and his Vietnam War Resistance: Defining Nonviolent Action through Gandhi and King

Lesson By: Quixada Moore-Vissing

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: 9-12 Grade English, Social Studies, or American Studies

Class Size: 25, group size recommend per topic: 3-4 students

Time/ Duration of Lesson: Three to four 50 minute classes

Goals/ Objectives of Lesson:
• Students will learn about Muhammad Ali’s act of civil disobedience in resisting the Vietnam War draft.
• Students will compare Ali’s reasoning behind his Vietnam War resistance with Martin Luther King’s thoughts on the Vietnam War.
• Students will consider how Ali’s actions link and fail to link with larger theories on nonviolent action.
• Students will debate and consider what constitutes true nonviolent action.
• Students will write a response to the question of Ali’s violent/nonviolent nature in his life and draft resistance.

Lesson Abstract:
To complete this lesson, it is expected that students have background knowledge of civil disobedience and the teachings/actions of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King. The next step in understanding civil disobedience is now to apply the theory of the “founders” of civil disobedience to actual historical events in American society. Students will apply their knowledge of civil disobedience to these historical acts and will be able to identify what aspects of the act emulate the teachings of the authors that they’ve read and what parts are different. In this lesson specifically, students will learn about champion boxer Muhammad Ali’s refusal to participate in serving in the Vietnam War, his consequent arrest, and the Supreme Court case that ensued as a result of his protest. Students will consider how Ali’s religion influenced his actions. Students will be reminded of the larger frameworks of civil disobedience according to Gandhi and King. Students will also address if Ali, who made his career on violence, can be considered a nonviolent person simply because of his anti-war position. Ultimately, students will debate and answer the question of if Ali’s act of civil disobedience is along Gandhi and King’s theory or other lines.

Lesson Content:

Note: For background on Thoreau’s civil disobedience or Gandhi’s satyagraha, see Quixada Moore-Vissing’s Lesson 1: Understanding Civil Disobedience: Origins, Theory, and Practice.

Muhammad Ali might not be the first person students think of in a dialogue about American acts of nonviolent civil disobedience. Ali, also known by his birth name, Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr., is one of the finest boxers in American history, attaining the title of heavyweight champion in 1964.

Through his boxing, Ali broke down race barriers by proving to the world that a black American could challenge and conquer any competitor – regardless of the competitor’s race.
For Ali, a pivotal realization of his purpose in life occurred after he won the Olympic Gold Medal in Italy. When Ali returned home to Louisville, KY, he proudly carried his medal around with him. He stopped at a restaurant, and the waitress refused to serve him because he was black. Ali was furious by the incident and that, though he was an international hero, he could not even get a meal without racism in his own country. As a result, Ali threw his gold medal in the river and vowed to begin working on behalf of his black brothers against racism in the United States.

Another major influence on Ali was his religion. At the age of 21, Ali was inspired by the political activist Malcolm X to convert to the Nation of Islam, a branch of the Muslim faith. This choice positively guided Ali to make many moral decisions, but also made it more difficult for him to achieve success. White Americans were still reluctant to accept a successful Christian black man into the mainstream, but a Muslim black man was an even greater stretch, and many resented Ali because of his religion.

Although there was some controversy over Ali’s mental examination for the military, he was drafted for the Vietnam War in 1966. Ali argued that his faith only allowed him to fight in a war if it was a religious war and that “[he] ain’t got no quarrel with the Viet Cong”. His refusal brought a tremendous public outcry against him. According to Jack Olsen in *Sports Illustrated*, "The governor of Illinois found Clay 'disgusting,' and the governor of Maine said Clay 'should be held in utter contempt by every patriotic American.' An American Legion post in Miami asked people to 'join in condemnation of this unpatriotic, loudmouthed, bombastic individual.' The *Chicago Tribune* waged a choleric campaign against holding the next Clay fight in Chicago.... The noise became a din, the drumbeats of a holy war. TV and radio commentators, little old ladies...bookmakers, and parish priests, armchair strategists at the Pentagon and politicians all over the place joined in a crescendo of get-Cassius clamor." (“Muhammad Ali” 1)

Ali’s refusal to participate in the Vietnam War had severe consequences on his life. The New York State Athletic Commission and World Boxing Association suspended his license and wanted to strip Ali of his title. Many people were irate at his actions, and he probably lost millions in standing by his convictions. In his article about Muhammad Ali, scholar Timothy Reed states the following:

    Ali appeared, as scheduled, before the draft board in Houston for his induction. When the name “Cassius Clay” was called to take the step forward signifying induction into the U.S. Army, Ali did not budge. Again his name was called but the self-proclaimed “greatest of all time” would not move. Ali was then informed that if he refused to take the step, he risked a U.S.$10,000 fine and five years’ imprisonment. And after his name was called twice more, Ali still did not take the step. Before leaving the induction center, Ali was told to write a statement telling why he refused to be inducted into the Army. He simply wrote, “I refuse to be inducted into the armed forces of the United States because I claim to be exempt as a minister of the religion of Islam.” (Reed 4)

On June 1, 1967, an all-white jury convicted Ali of violating the Selective Service Act, after only twenty minutes of deliberation. Federal District Judge Joe E. Ingraham then sentenced Ali to the maximum penalty of five years in prison.
and a fine of U.S.$10,000 (Reed 5). In April 1971, the Supreme Court ruled that Ali was justified in resisting the war because of his religious beliefs, and that his rights were protected by the First Amendment. Ali’s actions helped to turn the tide in the United States against the Vietnam War. Later in his life, Ali’s Vietnam War resistance has been deemed heroic by many.

**Connection to civil disobedience**

Ali’s refusal to participate in the Vietnam War and his consequent arrest are clear acts of civil disobedience. He is not unlike Thoreau in the patient way that he stood by his convictions, despite the knowledge that he would be arrested for his actions. Clearly, Ali understood the concept that his actions would speak louder than his words. However, students might also be confused by Ali’s lack of nonviolence in his career. Gandhi insisted that his “life was his message”, and that nonviolence was not just a belief system, but a way of living each day. To be a true satyagrahi, Gandhi advocated nonviolence even in the way that he ate strictly vegetarian food and dressed in homespun cloth only. Gandhi also advocated simplicity and non-possession. When Gandhi and his family went to leave South Africa after living there for many years, the community showered him with costly gifts of gold, silver, and diamonds. Much to his wife’s despair, Gandhi gave away all of the gifts he had received from this case and put them in a public trust. It is dubious that Gandhi would approve of Ali’s million dollar lifestyle derived from fighting others.

Students might also identify links in ideology between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Muhammad Ali. Both men were deeply religious and worked for black rights. However, another issue that Gandhi and King might disagree with is the notion that Ali’s anti-war actions are peaceful. Many perceive Ali’s war resistance as an act of nonviolence. One of the major questions that this lesson considers is what constitutes true nonviolence. Mahatma Gandhi believed that nonviolence was a way of life and had to be practiced in daily interaction. Dr. Martin Luther King embraced this aspect of Gandhi’s teachings, and maintained that peace was a comprehensive way of life. However, Ali refused to fight in the Vietnam War because he disagreed with that war in particular. Ali shared King’s belief that the United States should not be focusing on war abroad when there was still much work to be done domestically, particularly considering civil rights and racism in America. However, another major factor that fueled Ali’s war resistance was the fact that the Vietnam War was not a religious war, and was not related in any way to his Muslim faith. This implies that Ali would have fought a war if it was in the name of Islam. Therefore, there are some misconceptions in the idea that Ali transformed from a boxer to a pacifist. Ali was a role model for many Americans in his refusal to participate in the Vietnam War. However, his reasoning behind war resistance is not rooted in peace.

However, Ali did uphold Gandhi’s values in that he took action when he saw injustice. Ali stood by his religious convictions, claiming that fighting for sport in the ring and fighting for the purpose of killing were two very different issues. Not all civil disobedience has to be nonviolent, although in the Gandhian view of satyagraha, ahimsa (nonviolence) is at the core of all practices. Gandhi himself stated that it would be better to resort to violent action than no action at all. If Gandhi was confronted with Ali in his context – a black man who symbolically represented upward mobility in the face of the recent shift of American civil rights – he may have praised Ali’s life and actions. However, students should understand that, regardless of
Ali’s heroism, his anti-Vietnam war resistance does not fit in the framework of King and Gandhi’s nonviolent civil disobedience.

**Massachusetts English Content Standards for Grades 9-12:**
- 2.5 – Summarize in a coherent and organized way information and ideas learned from a focused discussion.
- 8.34 – Analyze and evaluate the logic and use of evidence in an author’s argument.
- 9.7 – Relate a literary work to the seminal ideas of its time.
- 19.30 – Write coherent compositions with a clear focus, objective presentations of alternative views, rich detail, well-developed paragraphs, and logical argumentation.

**Guiding Questions:**
- Why did Ali object to fighting in the Vietnam War?
- How did/does Ali’s religion influence his life?
- What similarities do Ali and King have in their views on the Vietnam War?
- What differences do Ali and King have in their views on the Vietnam War?
- What was the reaction of the American public when Ali refused to be drafted to Vietnam?
- Is Ali a hypocrite for objecting to fighting in a war despite the fact that he fights for a living?
- What aspects of Ali’s actions are not in line with Gandhi’s satyagraha?
- If you were going to make some “contemporary guidelines” for civil disobedience today, what would you define as actions that would fall under Gandhi’s idea of satyagraha?
- What ideologies and actions constitute true nonviolence?

**Materials Needed:**
- Computer
- Internet connection
- LCD projector
- Library resources
- Photocopy article “Peace Profile: Muhammad Ali” by Timothy L. Reed (included at end of this document)
- Photocopy article “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (included at end of this document)

**Lesson Context:**
This lesson is part of a larger unit on civil disobedience. In order for students to understand this lesson, they must have a background already on civil disobedience, particularly on the teachings of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King. This lesson on Muhammad Ali is supposed to serve as a prototype for students of how to conduct research on an assigned topic of civil disobedience and then link it to the teachings of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King in a creative presentation format. Students will also learn what nonviolence really means – and how true nonviolence is a lifestyle and system of beliefs, not just isolated actions. After the teacher uses this plan to model the research, synthesis, and application process to the class, students will then embark on their own
research journeys on other assigned acts of civil disobedience. The idea is for them to emulate the process and skills established in this lesson on Ali. Ideally, students should be able to differentiate between acts of civil disobedience and satyagraha, or nonviolence, as a lifestyle.

### Teaching Activities:


2. Read Timothy L. Reed’s *Peace Profile: Muhammad Ali*. Discuss the essay using a Socratic seminar. Frame the seminar with a focus question, such as the ones below:
   - Reed presents Muhammad Ali as a peacemaker and hero of the 1970s. Do you agree with Reed’s interpretation of Ali’s actions?
   - From what you know of Gandhi’s satyagraha, do you think he would approve of the way that Ali handled his war resistance? Support your answer with text from Gandhi’s writing and history from his life.

3. Read Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence”. Discuss the essay using a Socratic seminar. Frame the seminar with a focus question, such as the ones below.
   - What are Dr. King’s reasons for encouraging people to resist to the Vietnam War?
   - How do Dr. King’s reasons against the Vietnam War relate to and differ from Ali’s reasons?

4. After discussion, ask students to write a response to the questions below. You could ask one side of the class to argue for Ali and the other to argue against him:
   - Is Muhammad Ali perpetuating a cycle of violence by being a professional boxer? If yes, how do you relate this to his unwillingness to fight? Is he a hypocrite?
   - If Muhammad Ali is willing to fight in a war, just not the Vietnam War, is he truly a man of peace?

5. As students to select quotes that illustrate the difference between Ali’s civil disobedience and the civil disobedience of Gandhi, King, and Thoreau. Ask them to write about each quote, discussing the differences between the theory (Thoreau, Gandhi, and King) and the historical act (Muhammad Ali’s draft resistance).

6. Ask students to turn in the Thoreau, Gandhi, and/or King quotes that they selected with their written responses connecting the quotes to Ali. Select the five most referenced quotes
and write them on big pieces of paper. Post the paper around the classroom. Ask students to circulate, writing and responding to the quotes and how they link and don’t link to Ali.

7. After this activity is completed, take some time to again establish the variations between the ideas of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King, and the thoughts and actions of Ali.

8. Now that students understand the origins of civil disobedience and the differences between these origins and Ali’s actions, brainstorm presentation formats with students. Although students will not present on Ali, the process of comparing Ali to Thoreau, Gandhi, and King is one that they will imitate in their research presentations in the next lesson. See the “presentation handout” for details.

9. Ask students to debate the topic of civil disobedience verses satyagraha. You could have students take sides on this issue. One side could present the importance of nonviolence in lifestyle in addition to political resistance. Another could raise the question of if nonviolence is always effective in social change.

**Assessment/ Evaluation:**

1. Students will write a response to the question of if Muhammad Ali is perpetuating a cycle of violence by being a professional boxer. Students will be evaluated on their sophistication of ideas, clarity, supporting evidence, and mechanics.

2. Students will write analysis paragraphs on three quotations of their choice from the works of Gandhi or King. Students will be assessed on their ability to select quotations that relate to the importance of nonviolence in civil disobedience. Students will also be evaluated on their ability to demonstrate their understanding of civil disobedience through discussion and writing. Ideally, student responses should convey the differences between Ali’s civil disobedience compared to King and Gandhi’s. The clarity and mechanics of writing will also be assessed.

3. Students will be assessed on their participation in the classroom “walk-around” when they read, comment, and respond to the quotes others have selected in relation to the activity above.

**Extension Activities/ Enrichment:**

1. Proceed with the research project and presentation lesson on connecting Thoreau, Gandhi, and King’s ideas to historical acts of civil disobedience. See the presentation handout below to proceed with this lesson.

**Bibliography:**

*Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.*
www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm
Letter from a Birmingham Jail. [www.stanford.edu/group/King/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf)


Resistance to Civil Government. [http://www.transcendentalists.com/civil_disobedience.htm](http://www.transcendentalists.com/civil_disobedience.htm)

Muhammad Ali and the Vietnam War. [openvault.wgbh.org/saybrother/MLA000938/index.html](http://openvault.wgbh.org/saybrother/MLA000938/index.html)
Presentation Handout
For this project, students should demonstrate how the ideas and practices of Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have influenced American acts of civil disobedience. Students should be split into groups of approximately four people per topic. Each group will be assigned an American historical act of civil disobedience.

Students will conduct their own research on their topic. Each student should find 2 solid sources, and all of the students in the group are responsible for reading the articles of their group members in addition to their own (So if the group has 4 students, there should be a minimum of 8 research sources for that group). Students should document all sources in MLA format.

After completing their research on the assigned topic, students should work together to determine how their topic relates to the ideas of civil disobedience as demonstrated by Thoreau, Gandhi, and King. After making these connections, students should identify quotations from the text of the three authors that parallel or differ from the act of civil disobedience they are studying. These quotes serve as the support for the connections or negations they see in the theory of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King in comparison to the practices of Muhammad Ali, Alice Paul, etc. (Please see the list of topics at the end of the handout for all possible research topics.)

After students have figured out these connections, they must demonstrate their understanding of how Thoreau, Gandhi, and King’s words translate into actions in a 6-minute class presentation. Students will present 3 quotations to support their view of the connection between the ideas of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King The presentation should be in one of the three format: a skit, a movie, or a digital story. I-Movie or Windows Movie Maker are programs that walk students through the process of movie or digital story making. Ideally, the presentation should demonstrate an understanding of the fundamentals of civil disobedience, thorough knowledge of the assigned research topic, and clear and thoughtful connections between the theory and origins of civil disobedience and how these ideas are applied and re-invented throughout history. In this comprehensive understanding of civil disobedience, students will also be able to differentiate between true nonviolent resistance and acts of civil disobedience that happen to be nonviolent.

Potential Research Topics:

- Alice Paul and her hunger strikes for women’s rights
- Julia Butterfly Hill and her protection of the tree Luna
- Cesar Chavez and his strikes for migrant workers
- the Chicago Seven and resistance against the Vietnam War
- the Black Panthers and resistance against the Vietnam War
- the Berrigan brothers and Vietnam draft resistance
- Bobby Sands’s hunger strikes and civil disobedience in Northern Ireland
In the 1960s boxer Cassius Clay—later known as Muhammad Ali—became one of the most controversial and polarizing figures in the United States. While his decision to join the Nation of Islam alienated some, it was Ali’s refusal to be drafted into the armed forces during the Vietnam War that infuriated many Americans. Consequently, he became, arguably, America’s most vilified person. But as frustration with the conflict in Southeast Asia grew in the streets of America, Ali became a focal point for the anti-war movement. And, because he was willing to sacrifice everything to stand by his principles, he became one of the most admired people in the world.

Since the 1950s, the United States government had worked to prevent communism from overcoming the Southeast Asian country of Vietnam. “[A]s you know,” explained President John F. Kennedy in a 1962 news conference, “the U.S. for more than a decade has been assisting the government, the people of Vietnam, to maintain their independence.”; In August 1964, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara falsely informed the American public that “[w]hile on routine patrol in international waters, the U.S. destroyer Maddox underwent an unprovoked attack.”; This fabricated attack, which would come to be known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident, was used to justify the creation of a Congressional resolution granting President Lyndon Johnson broad discretion to use force in Southeast Asia. The resolution passed unanimously in the House, while only two senators opposed it.

Following the passage of the resolution, the United States launched an air campaign over North Vietnam and a massive troop build-up in the region. The Selective Service Act, which allowed the government to draft young men into the armed services, was invoked and by 1966 more than 400,000 American troops had been sent to South Vietnam.

By 1965, after twice failing the mental examination one had to pass to be drafted during the Vietnam War, Muhammad Ali’s draft classification stood at I-Y, deferred status. After finishing his second test, Ali stated, “[m]an, I am tired, but I did my best. I don’t want anyone to think I’m crazy.”; “Everywhere people were asking,” explains John Cottrell, “how such a supreme athlete with the ability to win the world heavyweight championship, spout poetry, and ad lib speeches, could be found unfit to carry a rifle in the Army.”;

As Howard Zinn explains, it was not until about 1968 that “the cruelty of the war began touching the conscience of many Americans.”; Because people felt Ali was purposely failing his military examinations during a time when many still
supported the war, and because he was a member of the Nation of Islam, anti-Ali sentiment steadily rose. An example of the “uproar”; against Ali’s I-Y classification was the Georgia attorney who had earlier organized a national “Fire Your Nigger Week”; campaign but then turned his energies to a new campaign: “Draft That Nigger Clay.”; A South Carolina Congressman also gave several speeches, in which he passionately declared,

Clay’s deferment is an insult to every mother’s son serving in [Vietnam]. Here he is, smart enough to finish high school, write his kind of poetry, promote himself all over the world, make a million a year, drive around in red Cadillacs—and they say he’s too dumb to tote a gun? Who’s dumb enough to believe that?

The World Boxing Association (WBA) even tried to strip Ali of his title, with president Ed Lassman stating that Ali was “provoking world-wide criticism and setting a very poor example for the youth of the world.” Ali reacted by stating, “you’re going to have trouble if you vacate my title. The whole Asian-African world is looking up to me;”; adding, “I give the youth and the other people something to look up to.”; While Lassman was unsuccessful in taking the championship belt from Ali, various other boxers were eager to remove the title from him through more traditional means, including Floyd Patterson, who volunteered to square off against Ali so that he could “take the title from the Black Muslim leadership.”

Former heavyweight champion Joe Louis was also critical of Ali. During the Second World War, Louis volunteered for U.S. Army service. The meek Louis, who in the eyes of white America “had never done anything to discredit his race,” was celebrated for his decision. “To whites,” explains Chris Mead, “Joe Louis was the symbol of his race. Louis’ generosity, his willingness to serve, and his patriotism reassured whites about the loyalty of all black Americans.” Louis was carefully used by the military to boost the morale of troops in the field, and to encourage blacks to enlist in the armed forces.

While controversy was brewing about Ali’s draft status, Louis said of the young fighter and his membership in the Nation of Islam, “The things they preach are just the opposite of what we believe. The heavyweight champion should be the champion of all the people. He has responsibilities to all the people.” Louis then went on to graphically describe how he would have brutally defeated Ali in the ring in his prime. Oddly enough, not only was Louis the fighter that Ali was said to have resembled as a baby, Louis was Ali’s “model hero” as young fighter. Now, the two stood in stark contrast to one another. Despite the growing pressure and hatred toward Ali, he maintained that his conscience precluded him from participating in the Vietnam conflict. “Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home,” contended the champ, “and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs.” In an interview for Sports Illustrated, Ali also explained that the war contradicted his strong religious beliefs:
If I thought going to war would bring freedom and equality to twenty-two million of my people, they wouldn’t have to draft me. I’d join tomorrow. But I either have to obey the laws of the land or the laws of Allah. I have nothing to lose by standing up and following my beliefs. We’ve been in jail for four hundred years.

Ali was torn between his civil duty and his religious obligation, and his internal dialogue would not allow him to disregard his loyalty to his faith. Although Ali made it clear that he had no interest in serving in the armed forces in any capacity, his non-Muslim handlers, as well as the government, still encouraged him to volunteer to serve in a Louis-like way. If he agreed to do so, it would make him a useful symbol for the government, and make money for his Louisville sponsors, since Ali would undoubtedly become an American hero and the biggest draw in boxing, following a tour in Vietnam. One of his benefactors, Worth Bingham, met with Ali and explained that the government “wanted the title back in ‘patriotic hands.’ ” Ali could choose which branch of the military to serve in, and after a few weeks of basic training would be sent to the “reserves or special services.” “You never go near a battlefield. It’s done everyday,” explained Bingham. But Ali would not take the deal. Finally, in February 1966, the stalemate between the heavyweight champion of the world and a world superpower was interrupted when the U.S. government made a decisive move. Ali received word that his draft status had been changed from I-Y to I-A, meaning that the boxer could be summarily inducted into the U.S. Army. When a reporter asked for Ali’s reaction to the change in his classification, he told the journalist, “I ain’t got no quarrel with the Viet Cong.”

Ali, the consummate poet, would later arrange his statement into verse:
Keep asking me, no matter how long
On the war in Vietnam, I sing this song
I ain’t got no quarrel with them Viet Cong.

Those words would come to be forever associated with the champ and his refusal to fight in Vietnam, for they succinctly captured the essence of his objection to the war. Although Ali was barred by the government from leaving the country after his draft classification was changed, he dedicated himself to challenging the war on the home front. “Ali took a fiercely political stand and went from one college campus to the next, speaking out against the war,” explains David Remnick. “He learned more about Vietnam and deepened his understanding of what was happening both to the country and to himself. He would not kill Vietnamese on behalf of a government that barely recognized the humanity of his own people.”

Even as controversy surrounded him, Ali still sought to look within, contemplating the significance of what was happening in Southeast Asia, in the U.S., and inside his soul.

As the date scheduled for his induction rapidly approached, Ali was presented with yet another opportunity to take the Joe Louis route, and voluntarily serve in the armed forces. An attorney and acquaintance of Ali’s called the champ to
let him know the “way [was] still open … for [Ali] … to make an agreement.”

Ali refused to make any agreement, and as he told the Philadelphia lawyer “no,”
according to an autobiographical account of the incident, he thought the
following to himself:

I know you would give me no trouble at all if I was the kind of conscientious objector
who can go into the armed services and do boxing exhibitions on Army posts or in
[Vietnam] or travel the country at the expense of the Government, live an easy life and be
guaranteed that I won’t have to get out in the mud and fight and shoot. But if I could do
this, I wouldn’t have raised all this stir in court and on the streets. I wouldn’t have given
up the millions I know I will have to give up by not going to [Vietnam]. I know my image
with the American public is completely ruined because of the stand I take … I do it only
because I mean it. I will not participate in this war.

Ali was well aware of the negative consequences he would face if he chose not
to go to Vietnam, yet he did not let them guide his decision. Nor did he allow
the positive consequences that would come with his service determine the course he would take.
Ali refused to participate in the Vietnam War because he simply could not live with himself if he
did. His conscience made it impossible for the champ to commit himself to a war that he saw as
immoral and unjust, and for his principles Ali was willing to risk every material possession he
had or would otherwise earn, for he would possess something far more valuable: a conscience
at peace.

On April 28, 1967 Ali appeared, as scheduled, before the draft board in
Houston for his induction. When the name “Cassius Clay” was called to take the
step forward signifying induction into the U.S. Army, Ali did not budge. Again
his name was called but the self-proclaimed “greatest of all time” would not
move. Ali was then informed that if he refused to take the step, he risked a
U.S.$10,000 fine and five years’ imprisonment. And after his name was called
twice more, Ali still did not take the step. Before leaving the induction center, Ali
was told to write a statement telling why he refused to be inducted into the
Army. He simply wrote, “I refuse to be inducted into the armed forces of the
United States because I claim to be exempt as a minister of the religion of
Islam.”

On June 1, 1967, an all-white jury convicted Ali of violating the Selective
Service Act, after only twenty minutes of deliberation. Federal District Judge Joe
E. Ingraham then sentenced Ali to the maximum penalty of five years in prison
and a fine of U.S.$10,000. Ali was freed pending appeal, but a cloud of
uncertainty hung over him. The man who believed he was destined to be the
“greatest of all time” exhibited personal responsibility, and now his future was
unclear. Only time would tell whether or not he would be redeemed.
In the short term, Ali’s refusal to be inducted into the army was costly. “I figure
that decision cost him ten million dollars in purses, endorsements, and the
rest,” noted one observer, “It also cost him the goodwill of many Americans who
thought he was a rich young man in perfect health avoiding military service and
using religion as an excuse.” On the same day he refused to take the step, the New York State Athletic Commission became the first of all such bodies to nullify Ali’s heavyweight title and suspend his boxing license. Also, the prospect of Ali being incarcerated after the court battles was a very realistic scenario. “It looks like trouble, Champ. This isn’t like any case I’ve had before,” Ali’s lawyer Hayden Covington told him. “Joe Namath can get off to play football and George Hamilton gets out because he’s going with the president’s daughter. But you’re different. They want to make an example out of you.”

But as Ali’s exile from the ring grew longer, popular sentiment turned dramatically against the Vietnam War. Notes Jeffery T. Sammons, “[m]any Vietnam veterans now protested the war, massive numbers of students mobilized around the country, a Pentagon official revealed a secret war against Cambodia, and large numbers of well-established lawyers marched on the nation’s capital in opposition to the war.” As the war grew to be more and more revolting to the American public, the stigma surrounding Ali grew less and less, until he was embraced as a celebrated symbol of the anti-war movement.

After a three-and-a-half-year hiatus, on October 26, 1970, Ali returned to the ring in Georgia, where there was no athletic commission. In Atlanta, he knocked out Jerry Quarry in the third round. His suspension was lifted by the various state commissions, and, after defeating Oscar Bonavena a month after the Quarry fight, Ali squared off against the undefeated champion, Joe Frazier, in the “Fight of the Century” at New York’s Madison Square Garden. The bout lived up to its billing, as Frazier retained his title in an epic 15-round decision on March 8, 1971.

On April 19, 1971, Ali’s draft evasion case was finally argued before the United States Supreme Court. The Court handed down a unanimous decision in favor of Ali on June 28. In his concurring opinion, Justice William O. Douglas wrote,

> What Clay’s testimony adds up to is that he believes in war as sanctioned by the Koran, that is to say, a religious war against nonbelievers. All other wars are unjust. That is a matter of belief, of conscience, of religious principle … Clay [was] “by reason of religious … training and belief” conscientiously opposed to participation in war of the character described by [his religion]. That belief is a matter of conscience protected by the First Amendment.

Now, not only was Ali’s objection to participation in the Vietnam War legitimate in the eyes of the public, but the Supreme Court, a branch of the very government that had targeted Ali and attempted to coerce him into participating in a war that he believed to be unjust, also validated his refusal to do so. In 1974, Ali would be invited to the White House by President Gerald Ford. After making a conscientious but unpopular decision years earlier, Muhammad Ali was truly
redeemed.

Timothy L. Reed graduated with honors from the University of San Francisco in May 2003 with a B.A. in politics. He currently resides in his hometown of Sacramento, where he works for the Sacramento Superior Court. Correspondence: 7612 Tierra Lawn Court, Sacramento, CA 95828, U.S.A. E-mail: timothylreed@yahoo.com
Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here tonight, and how
very delighted I am to see you expressing your concern about the issues that will be discussed tonight by turning out
in such large numbers. I also want to say that I consider it a great honor to share this program with Dr. Bennett, Dr.
Commager, and Rabbi Heschel, some of the distinguished leaders and personalities of our nation. And of course it’s
always good to come back to Riverside Church. Over the last eight years, I have had the privilege of preaching here
almost every year in that period, and it is always a rich and rewarding experience to come to this great church and
this great pulpit. I come to this magnificent house of worship tonight because my conscience leaves me no other
choice. I join you in this meeting because I am in deepest agreement with the aims and work of the organization
which has brought us together: Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam. The recent statements of your
executive committee are the sentiments of my own heart, and I found myself in full accord when I read its opening
lines: "A time comes when silence is betrayal." And that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam.

The truth of these words is beyond doubt, but the mission to which they call us is a most difficult one. Even when
pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy,
especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of
conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world. Moreover, when the issues at hand seem
as perplexed as they often do in the case of this dreadful conflict, we are always on the verge of being mesmerized
by uncertainty; but we must move on.

And some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is
often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited
vision, but we must speak. And we must rejoice as well, for surely this is the first time in our nation's history that a
significant number of its religious leaders have chosen to move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the
high grounds of a firm dissent based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history. Perhaps a new
spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movements and pray that our own inner being may be sensitive to its
guidance, for we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.

Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings
of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have
questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns this query has often loomed large and
loud: "Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King?" "Why are you joining the voices of dissent?" "Peace and
civil rights don't mix," they say. "Aren't you hurting the cause of your people," they ask? And when I hear them,
though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean
that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they
do not know the world in which they live.

In the light of such tragic misunderstanding, I deem it of signal importance to try to state clearly, and I trust
concisely, why I believe that the path from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church -- the church in Montgomery, Alabama,
where I began my pastorate -- leads clearly to this sanctuary tonight.

I come to this platform tonight to make a passionate plea to my beloved nation. This speech is not addressed to
Hanoi or to the National Liberation Front. It is not addressed to China or to Russia. Nor is it an attempt to overlook
the ambiguity of the total situation and the need for a collective solution to the tragedy of Vietnam. Neither is it an
attempt to make North Vietnam or the National Liberation Front paragons of virtue, nor to overlook the role they
must play in the successful resolution of the problem. While they both may have justifiable reasons to be suspicious
of the good faith of the United States, life and history give eloquent testimony to the fact that conflicts are never
resolved without trustful give and take on both sides.
Tonight, however, I wish not to speak with Hanoi and the National Liberation Front, but rather to my fellowed [sic] Americans, *who, with me, bear the greatest responsibility in ending a conflict that has exacted a heavy price on both continents.

Since I am a preacher by trade, I suppose it is not surprising that I have seven major reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision.* There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor -- both black and white -- through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated, as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and 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. So, I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

Perhaps the more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem. And so we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. And so we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would hardly live on the same block in Chicago. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.

My third reason moves to an even deeper level of awareness, for it grows out of my experience in the ghettoes of the North over the last three years -- especially the last three summers. As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they ask -- and rightly so -- what about Vietnam? They ask if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and 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 today -- my own government. For the sake of those boys, for the sake of this government, for the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent.

For those who ask the question, "Aren't you a civil rights leader?" and thereby mean to exclude me from the movement for peace, I have this further answer. In 1957 when a group of us formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, we chose as our motto: "To save the soul of America." We were convinced that we could never limit our vision to certain rights for black people, but instead affirmed the conviction that America would never be free or saved from itself until the descendants of its slaves were loosed completely from the shackles they still wear. In a way we were agreeing with Langston Hughes, that black bard of Harlem, who had written earlier:

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath --
America will be!

Now, it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read: Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over. So it is that those of us who are yet determined that America will be are led down the path of protest and dissent, working for the health of our land.
As if the weight of such a commitment to the life and health of America were not enough, another burden of responsibility was placed upon me in 1954** [sic]; and I cannot forget that the Nobel Prize for Peace was also a commission -- a commission to work harder than I had ever worked before for "the brotherhood of man." This is a calling that takes me beyond national allegiances, but even if it were not present I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I'm speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the good news was meant for all men -- for Communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the One who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them? What then can I say to the Vietcong or to Castro or to Mao as a faithful minister of this One? Can I threaten them with death or must I not share with them my life?

And finally, as I try to explain for you and for myself the road that leads from Montgomery to this place I would have offered all that was most valid if I simply said that I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men the calling to be a son of the living God. Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood, and because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come tonight to speak for them.

This I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation and for those it calls "enemy," for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.

And as I ponder the madness of Vietnam and search within myself for ways to understand and respond in compassion, my mind goes constantly to the people of that peninsula. I speak now not of the soldiers of each side, not of the ideologies of the Liberation Front, not of the junta in Saigon, but simply of the people who have been living under the curse of war for almost three continuous decades now. I think of them, too, because it is clear to me that there will be no meaningful solution there until some attempt is made to know them and hear their broken cries.

They must see Americans as strange liberators. The Vietnamese people proclaimed their own independence *in 1954* -- in 1945 *rather* -- after a combined French and Japanese occupation and before the communist revolution in China. They were led by Ho Chi Minh. Even though they quoted the American Declaration of Independence in their own document of freedom, we refused to recognize them. Instead, we decided to support France in its reconquest of her former colony. Our government felt then that the Vietnamese people were not ready for independence, and we again fell victim to the deadly Western arrogance that has poisoned the international atmosphere for so long. With that tragic decision we rejected a revolutionary government seeking self-determination and a government that had been established not by China -- for whom the Vietnamese have no great love -- but by clearly indigenous forces that included some communists. For the peasants this new government meant real land reform, one of the most important needs in their lives.

For nine years following 1945 we denied the people of Vietnam the right of independence. For nine years we vigorously supported the French in their abortive effort to recolonize Vietnam. Before the end of the war we were meeting eighty percent of the French war costs. Even before the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu, they began to despair of their reckless action, but we did not. We encouraged them with our huge financial and military supplies to continue the war even after they had lost the will. Soon we would be paying almost the full costs of this tragic attempt at recolonization.

After the French were defeated, it looked as if independence and land reform would come again through the Geneva Agreement. But instead there came the United States, determined that Ho should not unify the temporarily divided nation, and the peasants watched again as we supported one of the most vicious modern dictators, our chosen man, Premier Diem. The peasants watched and cringed as Diem ruthlessly rooted out all opposition, supported their extortionist landlords, and refused even to discuss reunification with the North. The peasants watched as all this was presided over by United States' influence and then by increasing numbers of United States troops who came to help quell the insurgency that Diem's methods had aroused. When Diem was overthrown they may have been happy, but
the long line of military dictators seemed to offer no real change, especially in terms of their need for land and peace.

The only change came from America, as we increased our troop commitments in support of governments which were singularly corrupt, inept, and without popular support. All the while the people read our leaflets and received the regular promises of peace and democracy and land reform. Now they languish under our bombs and consider us, not their fellow Vietnamese, the real enemy. They move sadly and apathetically as we herd them off the land of their fathers into concentration camps where minimal social needs are rarely met. They know they must move on or be destroyed by our bombs.

So they go, primarily women and children and the aged. They watch as we poison their water, as we kill a million acres of their crops. They must weep as the bulldozers roar through their areas preparing to destroy the precious trees. They wander into the hospitals with at least twenty casualties from American firepower for one Vietcong-inflicted injury. So far we may have killed a million of them, mostly children. They wander into the towns and see thousands of the children, homeless, without clothes, running in packs on the streets like animals. They see the children degraded by our soldiers as they beg for food. They see the children selling their sisters to our soldiers, soliciting for their mothers.

What do the peasants think as we ally ourselves with the landlords and as we refuse to put any action into our many words concerning land reform? What do they think as we test out our latest weapons on them, just as the Germans tested out new medicine and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe? Where are the roots of the independent Vietnam we claim to be building? Is it among these voiceless ones?

We have destroyed their two most cherished institutions: the family and the village. We have destroyed their land and their crops. We have cooperated in the crushing of the nation's only noncommunist revolutionary political force, the unified Buddhist Church. We have supported the enemies of the peasants of Saigon. We have corrupted their women and children and killed their men.

Now there is little left to build on, save bitterness. *Soon the only solid physical foundations remaining will be found at our military bases and in the concrete of the concentration camps we call "fortified hamlets." The peasants may well wonder if we plan to build our new Vietnam on such grounds as these. Could we blame them for such thoughts? We must speak for them and raise the questions they cannot raise. These, too, are our brothers.*

Perhaps a more difficult but no less necessary task is to speak for those who have been designated as our enemies.* What of the National Liberation Front, that strangely anonymous group we call "VC" or "communists"? What must they think of the United States of America when they realize that we permitted the repression and cruelty of Diem, which helped to bring them into being as a resistance group in the South? What do they think of our condoning the violence which led to their own taking up of arms? How can they believe in our integrity when now we speak of "aggression from the North" as if there were nothing more essential to the war? How can they trust us when now we charge them with violence after the murderous reign of Diem and charge them with violence while we pour every new weapon of death into their land? Surely we must understand their feelings, even if we do not condone their actions. Surely we must see that the men we supported pressed them to their violence. Surely we must see that our own computerized plans of destruction simply dwarf their greatest acts.

How do they judge us when our officials know that their membership is less than twenty-five percent communist, and yet insist on giving them the blanket name? What must they be thinking when they know that we are aware of their control of major sections of Vietnam, and yet we appear ready to allow national elections in which this highly organized political parallel government will not have a part? They ask how we can speak of free elections when the Saigon press is censored and controlled by the military junta. And they are surely right to wonder what kind of new government we plan to help form without them, the only party in real touch with the peasants. They question our political goals and they deny the reality of a peace settlement from which they will be excluded. Their questions are frighteningly relevant. Is our nation planning to build on political myth again, and then shore it up upon the power of new violence?
Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.

So, too, with Hanoi. In the North, where our bombs now pummel the land, and our mines endanger the waterways, we are met by a deep but understandable mistrust. To speak for them is to explain this lack of confidence in Western words, and especially their distrust of American intentions now. In Hanoi are the men who led the nation to independence against the Japanese and the French, the men who sought membership in the French Commonwealth and were betrayed by the weakness of Paris and the willfulness of the colonial armies. It was they who led a second struggle against French domination at tremendous costs, and then were persuaded to give up the land they controlled between the thirteenth and seventeenth parallel as a temporary measure at Geneva. After 1954 they watched us conspire with Diem to prevent elections which could have surely brought Ho Chi Minh to power over a united Vietnam, and they realized they had been betrayed again. When we ask why they do not leap to negotiate, these things must be remembered.

Also, it must be clear that the leaders of Hanoi considered the presence of American troops in support of the Diem regime to have been the initial military breach of the Geneva Agreement concerning foreign troops. They remind us that they did not begin to send troops in large numbers and even supplies into the South until American forces had moved into the tens of thousands.

Hanoi remembers how our leaders refused to tell us the truth about the earlier North Vietnamese overtures for peace, how the president claimed that none existed when they had clearly been made. Ho Chi Minh has watched as America has spoken of peace and built up its forces, and now he has surely heard the increasing international rumors of American plans for an invasion of the North. He knows the bombing and shelling and mining we are doing are part of traditional pre-invasion strategy. Perhaps only his sense of humor and of irony can save him when he hears the most powerful nation of the world speaking of aggression as it drops thousands of bombs on a poor, weak nation more than *eight hundred, or rather,* eight thousand miles away from its shores.

At this point I should make it clear that while I have tried in these last few minutes to give a voice to the voiceless in Vietnam and to understand the arguments of those who are called "enemy," I am as deeply concerned about our own troops there as anything else. For it occurs to me that what we are submitting them to in Vietnam is not simply the brutalizing process that goes on in any war where armies face each other and seek to destroy. We are adding cynicism to the process of death, for they must know after a short period there that none of the things we claim to be fighting for are really involved. Before long they must know that their government has sent them into a struggle among Vietnamese, and the more sophisticated surely realize that we are on the side of the wealthy, and the secure, while we create a hell for the poor.

Somehow this madness must cease. We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as one who loves America, to the leaders of our own nation: The great initiative in this war is ours; the initiative to stop it must be ours.

This is the message of the great Buddhist leaders of Vietnam. Recently one of them wrote these words, and I quote:

*Each day the war goes on the hatred increases in the heart of the Vietnamese and in the hearts of those of humanitarian instinct. The Americans are forcing even their friends into becoming their enemies. It is curious that the Americans, who calculate so carefully on the possibilities of military victory, do not realize that in the process they are incurring deep psychological and political defeat. The image of America will never again be the image of revolution, freedom, and democracy, but the image of violence and militarism (unquote).*
If we continue, there will be no doubt in my mind and in the mind of the world that we have no honorable intentions in Vietnam. If we do not stop our war against the people of Vietnam immediately, the world will be left with no other alternative than to see this as some horrible, clumsy, and deadly game we have decided to play. The world now demands a maturity of America that we may not be able to achieve. It demands that we admit that we have been wrong from the beginning of our adventure in Vietnam, that we have been detrimental to the life of the Vietnamese people. The situation is one in which we must be ready to turn sharply from our present ways. In order to atone for our sins and errors in Vietnam, we should take the initiative in bringing a halt to this tragic war.

*I would like to suggest five concrete things that our government should do immediately to begin the long and difficult process of extricating ourselves from this nightmarish conflict:

Number one: End all bombing in North and South Vietnam.

Number two: Declare a unilateral cease-fire in the hope that such action will create the atmosphere for negotiation.

Three: Take immediate steps to prevent other battlegrounds in Southeast Asia by curtailing our military buildup in Thailand and our interference in Laos.

Four: Realistically accept the fact that the National Liberation Front has substantial support in South Vietnam and must thereby play a role in any meaningful negotiations and any future Vietnam government.

Five: *Set a date that we will remove all foreign troops from Vietnam in accordance with the 1954 Geneva Agreement.

Part of our ongoing...part of our ongoing commitment might well express itself in an offer to grant asylum to any Vietnamese who fears for his life under a new regime which included the Liberation Front. Then we must make what reparations we can for the damage we have done. We must provide the medical aid that is badly needed, making it available in this country, if necessary. Meanwhile... meanwhile, we in the churches and synagogues have a continuing task while we urge our government to disengage itself from a disgraceful commitment. We must continue to raise our voices and our lives if our nation persists in its perverse ways in Vietnam. We must be prepared to match actions with words by seeking out every creative method of protest possible.

*As we 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 a path now chosen by more than seventy 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 exemptions and seek status as conscientious objectors.* These are the times for real choices and not false ones. 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.

Now there is something seductively tempting about stopping there and sending us all off on what in some circles has become a popular crusade against the war in Vietnam. I say we must enter that struggle, but I wish to go on now to say something even more disturbing.

The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality...and if we ignore this sobering reality, we will find ourselves organizing "clergy and laymen concerned" committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end, unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy.

And so, such thoughts take us beyond Vietnam, but not beyond our calling as sons of the living God.
In 1957, a sensitive American official overseas said that it seemed to him that our nation was on the wrong side of a world revolution. During the past ten years, we have seen emerge a pattern of suppression which has now justified the presence of U.S. military advisors in Venezuela. This need to maintain social stability for our investments accounts for the counterrevolutionary action of American forces in Guatemala. It tells why American helicopters are being used against guerrillas in Cambodia and why American napalm and Green Beret forces have already been active against rebels in Peru.

It is with such activity in mind that the words of the late John F. Kennedy come back to haunt us. Five years ago he said, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable." Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role 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 the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin...we must rapidly begin the 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, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of South America and say, "This is not just." The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just.

A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, "This way of settling differences is not just." This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing except a tragic death wish to prevent us from reordering our priorities so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. There is nothing to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood.

*This kind of positive revolution of values is our best defense against communism. War is not the answer. Communism will never be defeated by the use of atomic bombs or nuclear weapons. Let us not join those who shout war and, through their misguided passions, urge the United States to relinquish its participation in the United Nations. * These are days which demand wise restraint and calm reasonableness. * We must not engage in a negative anticomunism, but rather in a positive thrust for democracy, realizing that our greatest defense against communism is to take offensive action in behalf of justice. We must with positive action seek to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity, and injustice, which are the fertile soil in which the seed of communism grows and develops.*

These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wounds of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are rising up as never before. The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. We in the West must support these revolutions.
It is a sad fact that because of comfort, complacency, a morbid fear of communism, and our proneness to adjust to injustice, the Western nations that initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world have now become the arch antirevolutionaries. This has driven many to feel that only Marxism has a revolutionary spirit. Therefore, communism is a judgment against our failure to make democracy real and follow through on the revolutions that we initiated. Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores, and thereby speed the day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain."

A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.

This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind. This oft misunderstood, this oft misinterpreted concept, so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force, has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man. When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am not speaking of that force which is just emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have 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 belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: "Let us love one another, for love is God. And every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love." "If we love one another, God dwelleth in us and his love is perfected in us." Let us hope that this spirit will become the order of the day.

We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. And history is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate. As Arnold Toynbee says: "Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word" (unquote).

We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. 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." There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect. Omar Khayyam is right: "The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on."

We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace in Vietnam and justice throughout the developing world, a world that borders on our doors. If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full men, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message -- of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.

As that noble bard of yesterday, James Russell Lowell, eloquently stated:
Once to every man and nation comes a moment to decide,

In the strife of Truth and Falsehood, for the good or evil side;

Some great cause, God's new Messiah offering each the bloom or blight,

And the choice goes by forever 'twixt that darkness and that light.

Though the cause of evil prosper, yet 'tis truth alone is strong

Though her portions be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong

Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown

Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.

And if we will only make the right choice, we will be able to transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of peace.

If we will make the right choice, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our world into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.


* = text within single asterisks absent from this audio

** King stated "1954." That year was notable for the Civil Rights Movement in the USSC's Brown v. Board of Education ruling. However, given the statement's discursive thrust, King may have meant to say "1964" — the year he won the Nobel Peace Prize. Alternatively, as noted by Steve Goldberg, King may have identified 1954's "burden of responsibility" as the year he became a minister.

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