Title of Lesson:  
A Time to Break Silence: MLK speaks out on Vietnam

Lesson By:  
Andrew Terranova, Westchester High School, Los Angeles

Grade Level/ Subject Areas:  
11th Grade US History  
12th Grade Government

Class Size:  
Any

Time/Duration of Lesson:  
3—90-minute class periods

Guiding Questions:
- Why did King choose to “break the betrayal of [his] own silence” and speak out against the war in Vietnam in spite of the political risks that it represented for the civil rights movement?
- What were some of the criticisms made by those inside and outside the movement with regards to his decision to speak out? How did King respond to these criticisms?
- How do King’s words apply to the current political context?

Lesson Abstract:
This lesson asks students to investigate Martin Luther King’s decision to speak out against the war in Vietnam. By reading excerpts from King’s speech and analyzing other primary source documents, students will examine why King made the decision to speak out, how people inside and outside the movement responded, and how his analysis of the connections between war, racism, and imperialism echo in our world today.

Lesson Content:
Everyone is familiar with Martin Luther King’s tremendous leadership within the Black Freedom Movement in the United States. Sadly however, over the past few decades King’s life and legacy have been diluted and de-politicized. Schools are particularly complicit in this sanitization of his thought. Every year around the time of the holiday in his honor, teachers across the nation trot out brief excerpts of his “I Have a Dream” speech and consider their work done. In this version of history, King is no longer the radical practitioner of nonviolence who argued for a “revolution in values” in the US; instead he is reduced to a few short sentences about being judged by the content of one’s character. Many of our students have grown tired of hearing this simplified sanitization of King’s thought year after year. If we as teachers do not recover the fullness of King’s legacy for our students, they will miss out on these complex lessons he presents us, or worse yet, be pushed away from having any interest in learning about the civil rights movement.

King’s speech Beyond Vietnam, is in many ways an ideal antidote for the sanitization of his thought. He gave this speech on April 4, 1967—one year to the day before his assassination—to a crowd of 3,000 people at Riverside Church in New York City. It was in this speech that he “moved to break the betrayal of [his] own silence” and oppose the US war in Vietnam.

As a Nobel Peace Prize winner, King felt a deep duty to work for the “brotherhood of man” and
yet found it increasingly challenging to advocate nonviolent action to young black men in Northern ghettos. As he remarked in the speech, “I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems…But they ask—and rightly so—what about Vietnam?” (King)

Immediately following his speech, some people both inside and outside the movement criticized King’s decision. Newspapers railed against him for linking the twin issues of civil rights and peace. The New York Times warned, “the moral issues in Vietnam are less clear-cut than he suggests” (Editorial, 4/7/67 p. 36). King responded by pointing out the intellectual folly of those that encouraged him to be non-violent in the struggle for Black Freedom, and yet condemned him for urging the same in Vietnam.

It was a difficult decision for King to speak out—and one that he did not take lightly. He understood that people would oppose his decision, but felt compelled to follow his heart. He describes this in his autobiography:

> On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘Is it politic?’ And Vanity comes along and asks the question, ‘Is it popular?’ But Conscience asks the question, ‘Is it right?’ And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right. (Carson, p. 342)

This is a potentially powerful “teachable moment” for our students: King knew that he was right to speak out against the war, but he also understood that it also might cost him some people’s support. His actions exemplify the type of courageous, critical thinking that we want to encourage in our students.

In Beyond Vietnam, King made the connection between the tremendous spending required for the war and the “evisceration” of investment in the War on Poverty. If anything, the validity of this critique has only grown over the past 4 decades. Today, we are in the midst of a full-scale economic depression and facing devastating budget cuts and yet the US military budget is still larger than those of the rest of the nations of the world combined (Greenwald). This passage presents students with an ideal opportunity to debate the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

King pointed out the tremendous irony that the war was “taking the young black men who have been crippled by our society and sending them 13,000 miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem.” Instead of participating in the destruction of Vietnam, he urges young men to seek status as conscientious objectors. (King).

In a passage of his speech, King quoted a prophetic warning from Buddhist monks in Vietnam:

> 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.

This message is eerily applicable to the world we find ourselves in following the post-9-11, War on Terror and should be sure to pique student interest and prompt discussion and debate.
The real power of *Beyond Vietnam* lies in the fact that King didn’t just critique the war, but he turned his gaze inward arguing that Vietnam was “but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit.” He argued that we needed to get on the right side of what was in fact a world revolution. As if conjuring up Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization from *Hind Swaraj*, King’s oratory reaches a crescendo arguing:

> 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. (King)

He concluded his speech by reminding us that we as a society have a choice. The question is whether we will choose “nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation.” We are faced with the same stark choice today. Within a week of his speech, King was putting his words into practice, helping to lead an anti-war mobilization of 100,000 to the United Nations in New York (Branch, p. 599-601).

The text of this speech is long (even once excerpted!) and it will be no-doubt challenging for many of our students, but the continuing relevance of King’s words to our current political context is undeniable. While the challenge may be great, the pay-off will be greater still.

---

**State Content Standards:**

California State History Standards:

11.10.4 Examine the roles of civil rights advocates
12.3.2 Students evaluate and take and defend positions on what the fundamental values and principles of civil society are.

**Materials Needed:**

- Episode 10, “The Promised Land” from *Eyes on the Prize II.*
- *Beyond Vietnam:* Excerpted Text
- Primary Document Responses to *Beyond Vietnam.*
- Post-its

**Possible Teaching Activities:**

**Day I:**

Step 1) Warm-up: “A time comes when silence is betrayal”  Have students write a journal entry on a time in their life when someone’s silence represented a betrayal to someone else. Discuss responses.

Step 2) Watch the first 10 minutes of “The Promised Land” to introduce the context of the Vietnam war and the War on Poverty. Student quick-write and discussion.

Step 3) Begin reading *Beyond Vietnam.* Teacher reads aloud in class, stopping for discussion and to ensure understanding, while students underline phrases that are particularly moving. Phrases should be no more than 6 words long. Students should each end up with approximately 15-20 phrases each by the end.
### Day II:
Step 1) Finish reading *Beyond Vietnam* as a class and selecting phrases.
Step 2) Give students strips of post-its and have them each re-copy the ten or so phrases that they like the best onto their post-it strips.
Step 3) Put students into groups of three and have them arrange their phrases into a poem reflecting some of the same sentiments as King’s original speech.
Step 4) Ask for student volunteers to read their poems to the class.
Step 5) Pass out handout of questions—students choose 4 out of 6 and respond to them in thorough paragraphs for homework.

### Day III:
Step 1) Discuss questions from homework
Step 2) Divide students into groups that support King’s speech and groups that oppose
King’s stance and give them packets of the primary source documents
Step 3) Each group will use the documents to create a one-page Editorial that either support or critiques King’s stance.
Step 4) Students share their Editorials with the class and their group (or “Editorial Board”) will field follow-up questions from the opposing groups.

**The Martin Luther King Papers Project at Stanford University has an initiative called “Liberation Curriculum” that has developed model lessons on aspects of King’s Life and Legacy: [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/lc/index](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/lc/index) They have a lesson on “Beyond Vietnam written by Erin Cook and Stan Pesick which has excellent links to the primary source responses to King’s speech cited above.**

### Bibliography:


[http://www.salon.com/opinion/greenwald/2008/01/02/military_spending/](http://www.salon.com/opinion/greenwald/2008/01/02/military_spending/)
Accessed: 7/19/09

King, Martin Luther. “Beyond Vietnam.” Speech given at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967
[http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/liberation_curriculum/speeches/beyondvietnam.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/liberation_curriculum/speeches/beyondvietnam.htm)
Accessed: 7/19/09

Accessed: 7/19/09