

Vietnam to Iraq: Martin Luther King and Values

I.

A Brooklyn federal court in March dismissed a civil suit filed on behalf of millions of Vietnamese against U.S. chemical companies charged with war crimes for having supplied the military with Agent Orange. The dismissal was on technical grounds, not on its merits; the contention that the chemical defoliants used during the war is still causing horrendous birth defects three decades after the war's end and was not disproved. Sovereign immunity prevented the suit from being filed directly against the U.S. government – a rather ironic fact in light of how little consideration is given toward other nation's sovereignty in the making of our foreign policy. Even so, the Justice Department sided with the chemical companies against the Vietnamese claim.

An article about the court's action was placed in the middle of the New York Times metro section, as little attention was paid in other media outlets. Just as the 30th anniversary of the reunification of Vietnam on April 30th was largely ignored, so with this case, the opportunity to engage in a public discussion about the war was lost. Lost too – and the reason so little discussion has taken place – was the opportunity to ask what values dominate a society that could cause such massive damage to another society; the refusal to acknowledge, let alone make amends for, the havoc wrought.

This refusal helps explain the court's action (inaction). Eleven million gallons of Agent Orange were dropped on Vietnam by the U.S. air force in the years 1965-1973, this forming part of the 19 million gallons of herbicides used and was in addition to the 8 million bombs dropped. Its effectiveness can be measured by the destruction of 60 percent of Vietnam's mangrove forests, the "collateral" damage of increased risk of cancer and birth defects to people considered a risk worth taking. The fact that human life was jeopardized incidental to the main goal of destroying the targeted local environment formed a key part of the ruling. Judge Weinstein, the Appeals Court judge who heard the case, argued in his decision that the 1925 Geneva Convention outlawing the use of poison gas in war did not apply in this instance because, "the prohibition extended only to gases deployed for their asphyxiating or toxic effects on man, not to herbicides designed to affect plants that may have unintended harmful effects on people."

A line of reasoning that can lead one to wonder what rationale would have been employed if a suit had been filed on behalf of the tens of thousands of Vietnamese, a high proportion of them children, who had been killed or maimed by unexploded mines and bombs since the end of the war. Undoubtedly some excuse would be found, after all the fundamental problem is that there is still an absolute unwillingness on the part of the federal authorities to admit that the war itself was at its root immoral and illegal.

Such an admission, were it to be made, could have far-reaching implications, for an admission of the injustice of our actions toward Vietnam would call into question our other military actions in which we, without clean hands, presume to sit in moral judgment

of others. It would also mean admitting that responsibility for what befell U.S. soldiers in Vietnam falls on the White House administrations who sent them there, not on the Vietnamese whom they were fighting.

For the soldiers ordered to fight bore a heavy price too, the weight all the greater if it is remembered that no Americans were killed by the Vietnamese on our soil (that task handled by the National Guard). A cost borne not only in the memories of the more than 50,000 killed in action, but as well, on a daily basis, by the 70,000 quadriplegics and multiple amputees who were among the 300,000 wounded. Less visible, yet no less real, are the costs shown by various estimates that a large number of Americans who served in Vietnam have been homeless, have attempted suicide. And, as anyone who has spent much time behind bars can attest, more than a few veterans have wound up in our country's jails and prisons.

As to Agent Orange, after years of denial which only gave way under political pressure by veterans, matched by legal action and medical evidence, the Veterans Administration agreed to pay \$140 million to those who developed prostate cancer due to the exposure. Not known – because for years denied as even a possibility by federal officials – is how many children of the U.S. personnel who served in Vietnam have birth defects that can be traced to the chemical warfare in which we (not they) engaged. Like so much else in our society, those most afflicted by circumstance are given the least help.

What happened in Vietnam is known, yet not sufficiently or widely enough known as much as what was learned during the war has been forgotten; has not been taken to heart enough to succeed in changing how our government relates to the world. As witness we can see the same arrogance of power, the same contempt for human life sitting alongside familiar rationalizations, justifications, excuses and plain lies in use in arguments for our current war against Iraq.

Lies that mean dismissing history the way a lawsuit is dismissed; suppressing the memory of what happened so that the myth of the innocence, the superiority and righteousness of U.S. society can be preserved. Not too surprising; this parallels how for many years slavery was sanitized or simply ignored – today that is no longer quite true, but like Vietnam it is seen simply as a “mistake,” and not terribly fundamental to our national identity. The success of this way of understanding our past can be noted by the surprise most Americans register at the shock of discovering that people abroad don't all share the same image of our beneficence. Another lesson of Vietnam slowly being relearned today.

Similarities abound between the two wars; it is for that reason that the critique of what we did in Vietnam; the critique of the causes of what we did that lay within our society, continue to speak powerfully to the realities of our present, of the need to change these realities. And it is this which brings us to a consideration of the perspective offered in the 1960s by Martin Luther King. Over the course of his life, King developed and deepened his critique of the injustice of racial discrimination until he developed a full critique of the structure of our society and of our society's values. Turned into an icon, the content

of what he stood for is to often forgotten. Forgotten much the way the history of the Vietnam war is forgotten.

By looking at what King stood for; the actions he denounced, the alternative he put forward, we can begin to recover memories that too many in high places would prefer remain forgotten. By looking at how the social injustices he denounced then remain to be overcome today; how the injustice of the war in Vietnam he condemned then parallels the injustice of the war in Iraq that ought to be condemned now we might take a step toward finding the road to build a world of peace and justice, as sadly lacking as urgently needed now as in the past.

II.

“This is not just” – King repeatedly punctuated his indictment of war and oppression with those words in his April 1967 “Breaking the Silence” speech at the Riverside Memorial church in New York; it is in understanding how he gave content to that phrase that the present day relevance of his speech becomes evident. This was the occasion when King made explicit the underlying linkage between the struggle for civil rights in the U.S. and the struggle against the war in Vietnam. Exactly one year later an assassin’s bullet took King’s life; his loss one of the too many losses of those years that cumulatively forestalled the recreation, the restructuring and transformation of our society. The receding of the hope that animated King’s vision has resulted in an ever-more impoverished democracy, a waning of a belief in equality and a culture less and less able to resist the greed and end justifies the means philosophy so evident in both domestic and foreign policy. Evident too is an ever-more impoverished culture, marked by the growth of intolerance, the easy acceptance of wealth and poverty sitting side by side, the assertion that war equals strength, peace weakness.

Lost too, for too many individuals as for society as a whole, has been the sense of self that the social struggles that occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s forced millions of Americans to confront. Seeing ourselves as we were meant seeing ourselves as the aggressors in Vietnam, meant seeing the double standard by which war abroad, in all its brutality, was as easily rationalized as had so many rationalized the actions of the Nazis in an earlier era. Implicitly (or explicitly) the lives of those whom our weapons killed were viewed as being of less value, less worthy of life, than the lives of those sitting in safety, giving the orders. The double standard behind our military actions was revealed as little different from that within our borders, fire hoses in Alabama and dead bodies in Mississippi having brought our country face to face with the violence of the racism built into the fabric of everyday life.

Unfortunately, once the pressure of social protest dissipated that self-reflection was weakened and so the double standard reasserted itself. The poor are blamed for their poverty, and society is thus absolved of responsibility, as we have seen in 2005 in New Orleans. Hurricanes are natural disasters, but the disproportionate suffering by the poor, especially the black poor, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina is anything but natural. Revealed by the tragedy was just how invisible the black community, its needs, hopes,

realities, have become to the federal government. Poverty in any color is also outside its purview, thus the unawareness that so many might lack the means to evacuate the city. Invisible not to those without but to those isolated in their comfort – at least until the crisis, when death, despair, anger flickered on TV screens for a momentary glimpse. Too momentary to force enough people to ask the harsh question of why this should be nor to recommit to meeting the needs of all. And, as always, the retreat from general responsibility by the neglect of some comes at a cost to all, one need look no further than the crumbling levees for evidence of that.

When it comes to war, the double standard is even clearer. We act the victim when we are the aggressor, we claim morality when the immorality of our actions are evident to all who are willing to see. Meaningful protests against the war in Iraq have taken place, nonetheless they have yet been unable to shift the political balance. The Bush Administration has been able to conduct the war with a relatively free hand, a sign of how much of our recent past, of that look in the mirror, has been forgotten. Or perhaps the challenge that was posed to social injustice is remembered all too well by those whose power rests on denying the centrality of equality to democracy, by those for whom freedom means the ability of some to exercise unrestrained power over others.

The logic of past dissent therefore needs to be revived and recalled as a basis for assessing the present – recalled, that is, by those for whom originally intended. The assertion that expansionist militarism and a commitment to democratic rights can be simultaneously sustained has been shown to be the illusion that anti-war critics originally claimed; unless the former is restricted the latter will be threatened with extinction. In that respect it is not inappropriate to suggest that our country stands on the edge of a precipice, one toward which the 2004 presidential election pushed us a little closer. Whether we fall off, with incalculable consequences, or are able to turn around so as to chart a different course, depends on what we do. A choice that cannot be indefinitely delayed.

Choice toward change means again honestly facing our reality, it is for that reason King's words need to be remembered. Undiminished in its clarity, King's April 1967 remarks bear witness to the costs our country's path is incurring, just as they do the continued pressing need for basic change of our social system and way of life. The parallel between the conditions he confronted in the 1960s and those we now face is evident in the passage below from his speech:

A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle [for justice]. 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 build-up in Vietnam – 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 drain men and skills and money like some demonic suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

Currently, that shining moment is barely a faded memory, not even a pretense of a government commitment to end poverty remains, little left of a popular conviction that it could be possible. Witness the 1990s, even during a time of economic growth a liberal Democratic president and Congress were unable to expand social insurance when it came to health. What's worse, the Clinton Administration initiated an evisceration of welfare with a reform that left already-shredded New Deal and Great Society programs a little more tattered.

Now we see the Bush Administration proceed relentlessly (and as unabashedly as it engages in military aggression) in policies that benefit the rich at the expense of the poor; the differential treatment of wealthy taxpayers looking for a loophole and the working poor seeking to qualify for earned income tax credits being only one of the more egregious examples. The attempt to undermine Social Security, an attempt only possible due to the weak edifice of our social safety net (itself a telling phrase, far from the goal of uplift) carries the danger of increasing poverty among the elderly – a danger clearly irrelevant to those trying to reform the system out of existence. The glimpse of hope which King spoke, shattered a bit more with each successive Administration, is now on the verge of being nailed completely shut.

During the early years of the Cold War, until Vietnam broke the back of that particular illusion, official policy was premised on the possibility that we could afford guns and butter. It was the inability to provide both – especially when those still excluded during the 1950s demanded to be included in that era's prosperity – that fueled much of the anger that came to be directed at LBJ. Today there isn't even an attempt to create a balance; military spending is sacrosanct no matter what the shape of the economy, number of unemployed, amount of hunger.

Spending justified, as during Vietnam, as during Reagan's arms build-up, by the excuse of national security – a rather inappropriate term in light of the insecurity that characterizes the life of too many; an insecurity that is one of the few constants in life for those who have to do without. It shouldn't take much imagination to picture what it would mean toward making the life of people more secure if the billions of dollars now spent on war were redirected toward job programs, low-cost housing, medical and other forms of social insurance. The truth of King's assertion that "war is an enemy of the poor" remains.

This is manifested in another manner; militarism serves to undermine solidarity based on equality in favor of a solidarity of hierarchy, of obedience. Refusing to acknowledge those without as equal to those who have – for that is what present-day welfare policy, tax policy, criminal justice policy amount to – is a denial of the justice upon which society ought to rest; undermines the cohesiveness upon which its stability needs to rest. This is an absence stemming from class realities rooted in economic structures (not lifestyle choices), as well as from an inequality rooted in discrimination, most profoundly, racial discrimination. Yet it is an absence which the image of military

solidarity, of shared experience in combat, pretends to deny. What King said in this respect too, could be uttered with equal conviction today:

... 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. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would never live on the same block in Detroit. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.

In 1954, *Brown vs. Board of Education* declared segregated education illegal; that ruling is still the law of the land, yet the reality is that most blacks and most whites are still educated apart from each other. So too is the reality that the education most blacks receive is inferior to what most whites are able to obtain. We can note too that the 1965 Voting Rights Act prohibited discrimination at the ballot box, any close look at what in Florida in November 2000, in Ohio 2004, shows that such discrimination is alive and well.

Gains have been made in the years since King's speech, some doors previously closed have opened, public discourse has changed, reflecting increased acceptance of inclusiveness for broader than what existed prior to the civil rights era. Yet withal the gap between what is said and what is lived has grown proportionately; the word equality thrown about by people more interested in how it sounds than in how its content might be realized. In every significant social indicator – unemployment levels, average wages, infant mortality, life expectancy, numbers in college, numbers incarcerated – the disparity between black and white remains, the structural roots of racism left untouched by court rulings and public policy alike. And the persistence of the attitudes which rationalize, justify, these disparities are revealed as much in the pseudo-intellectualism of the "Bell Curve" as in the brutality visited upon Abner Louima.

The disparate conditions that separate black and white (or truly, the disparate conditions under which all the various communities that comprise our society must live) tend to mask what is in common. The retreat from the path of equality that became evident in the 1970s had the effect of undermining the way of life of all working people irrespective of race, nationality, ethnicity. The stagnation of real wages the past 30 years; the need for two incomes where one before would suffice, the expansion of credit to meet consumer demand highlighting an uncertainty about tomorrow, an uncertainty that a lost job or a medical emergency could crystallize into a crisis – the fact is that corporate-driven reaction ultimately spares no one, a conclusion that would not have surprised King.

Division (perhaps one should say segregation) at the ballot box has also grown in the intervening years; and with a similar deleterious impact on all poor and working people, as it does on society itself. A disproportionate number of African-Americans don't vote, of those who do, a disproportionate number vote for Democratic Party candidates. Looked at in reverse, this means only a very small percentage vote for Republican Party

candidates – a racial voting divide that reflects how little woven together is our social fabric. Notwithstanding the presence of Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice or Alan Keyes, nor the occasional attempt to win votes through the most conservative of black churches, the plain fact is that no serious and substantial effort has been made by the Republican Party to attract black votes since at least the early 1970s. This is in part because of the advocacy of economic and social policies that reinforce the pre-existing hierarchical structures that the civil rights struggle aimed at, yet was unable to overcome. It is also a consequence of a clear decision to build support among a large segment of white voters for whom racism appears as a solution rather than a problem. Beginning with Nixon's use of the "law and order" theme associated with George Wallace; to Reagan's campaign speech in Philadelphia, Mississippi, in which the names Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were never mentioned; to Bush Sr.'s demagogic use of Willie Horton, to Bush Jr.'s pandering at Bob Jones University; that message has been repeated over and over again in language unmistakable to those for whom intended.

Realities of separation and discord are, however, invisible in commercials for the "few, the proud, the Marines," as it is in any of the ads for the armed forces which almost always show black, white, Latino, men and women, together in an idealized community. That society's tensions and divides continue to find expression within the military is passed over in silence as is the fact that whatever unity is achieved tends to be at the expense of other peoples. As King's entire history of activism sought to demonstrate, so long as the overcoming of our domestic divisions is sought in attacks on hidden enemies abroad, the existing problems we do face will remain unexplored, unaddressed, unresolved.

The success in selling the war against Iraq to sufficient numbers of people to have made it a viable option for the Bush Administration reflects its ability to disguise reality with images; it is also a marker of how far society at large has moved from the self-examination so central to political discourse during the Vietnam-era. Yet the nationalism of military action can only temporarily hide the internal conflicts existing in society, it cannot erase them. War is an act of despair by those who sit at the pinnacle of power in our country, which all the bravado and hoopla of press statements cannot hide. The attack on Iraq is a sign that the point has been reached where armed force is viewed as the signal means by which to defeat the political, economic and social challenge to U.S. imperial hegemony.

Our history has in many ways been characterized by an on-going struggle between various movements aimed at democratization as against various violent attempts to limit that democratic impulse; the slave South's initiation of the civil war the most extreme instance of the latter. Since then this conflict has to a significant degree been played out in disputes between advocates and opponents of imperial expansion, as reflected in the way that the permanent militarization of the Cold War years laid the framework for the authoritarianism now in evidence. The civil rights/black freedom movement and opposition to the war in Vietnam represented a serious challenge to the limitation of rights which marked the 1950s; the inability of those and the other movements associated with the New Left to bring about a fundamental transformation – to which King's

assassination stands as such a sharp statement – opened the door to the intensification of all the social ills he denounced.

A sense of our history (let alone logic or morality) serves as a testament to the truth that wars of aggression cannot serve as the basis of a just society. In the wake of September 11 there was a great deal of talk as to how crisis could overcome social amorality and the hedonism of contemporary culture by creating a healing sense of greater purpose. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were presented in the mythic images of World War II (Korea conveniently forgotten, Vietnam held as an aberration), context of the struggle against fascism as easily ignored as were the war's actual horrors. That homelessness, hunger, hatred and despair at home hasn't elicited such commitment, left unnoticed amidst the cheerleading.

Which lack of commitment highlights all the more the fact that the military is composed disproportionately of black and Latino soldiers, that soldiers of any race or ethnicity tend to come from working-class families far more than from homes of the wealthy (a truth even greater if one only counts those who face bullets). In other words, those most likely to serve in the armed forces are those whose social and economic problems of daily life are least likely to be addressed by government action. King's charge of war serving as "the cruel manipulation of the poor" – be they black or white, as true as ever.

War is the application of violence to solve a given set of problems; when engaged in under government orders such violence is given moral authority. The proclivity to use armed force or the threat of armed force by the Bush Administration (more blatant than most previous administrations, yet flowing from the sabre-rattling in which they engaged) should leave little wonder at the ease with which the use of violence has been rationalized near and far as the means by which to resolve conflict. More than a little hypocrisy is involved when a president, LBJ or Clinton, Nixon or Bush, pretends there is a difference; a hypocrisy King refused to countenance:

... [I] tried to offer them [young black militants who rejected non-violence] my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through non-violent action. But they asked – and rightly so – what about Vietnam? They asked if our nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their question hit home, and I know that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghetto without having spoken to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government. For the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent.

Sentiments ignored by those who preach to other what they will not practice themselves, of those who accept the established order as natural and permanent and thus fail to see its guns and bombs for what they are. The structure of international relations our government seeks to impose globally, the "invisible" hands of the market which silence the subjected and make a hollow shell of democratic governance, the visible hands on the

trigger aimed at those who persist in asserting impermissible demands; these need to be challenged and overcome, first and foremost within our own political culture, if peace and justice are to prevail.

Challenged too, needs to be the notion that our nation can dictate to others how they should live, it means challenging the lack of empathy with people abroad who are treated either patronizingly as symbols (of poor victims, heroic democrats, brave freedom fighters, the image of the hour) when favored; or when disfavored, as nameless bodies that do not suffer, bleed, laugh or hope as “we” do. As critical, ignoring our own government’s actions abroad that maintain systematic inequalities means refusing to understand the why of what is done in anger. Understanding is not justification, yet without understanding violence appears to spring from nowhere without cause – and if there is no cause there is no solution other than that implemented by the Bush Administration. Repression of violence by greater violence is a cycle that serves only as an excuse to buttress the power of the already powerful.

King’s remark, it should be clear, was not meant as a comment on the use of violence as a form of social protest abroad, rather, he was speaking to issues at home. The year 1967 was one marked by a growth of militancy in the black community, the year of Newark and Detroit, of a radicalization of protests against racism as it became evident that the reforms which had been won were themselves insufficient to bring changes of needed depth. The years since saw the movement disrupted due in no small part to the greater amount of force the state had at its disposal to suppress dissent. The quotation above from King, however, has, if anything, gained in relevance for it is the seeming absence of the possibility of meaningful change through collective action that a climate of hopelessness is created that expresses itself in street violence. Violence as part of a life lived in a hurry, to be enjoyed today without thought of tomorrow, for the future is too uncertain, too unsure, to be counted upon.

Moreover, the glorification of war, all but openly enshrined as the guiding principle behind our nation’s foreign policy, has trickled down throughout society. Which brings us to the question so much discussed during the 2004 presidential election campaign at the level of surface platitudes, of values: those personal ones by which we judge the behavior of ourselves and individuals around us, those social ones by which society judges itself.

Democracy is, in theory, premised on the presumed connection between the two – that we each have equal rights and equal capacities for self-rule, that we are able to recognize and combine social with personal self-interest, thus making majority rule and individual freedom both possible. Yet for that definition to be realized as something lived means to understand the context of its current limitations. The reality of a capitalist society in which some profit from the labor of others; in which great concentrations of wealth (and therefore inequality of power) are inescapable needs to be addressed. Otherwise the danger exists, a danger we are experiencing, of democratic rule being reduced to a purely formal mechanism, divorced from popular need and everyday concerns (divorced too from fundamental issues such as war or peace) designed solely to confirm what already

exists. The struggle therefore is to make of democracy a system real enough that through it people discover the collective strength to control, to transform, the social conditions and economic structures under which they live. The reason that participatory governance, the application of popular rule to the economy is possible is because the interests of us all and the ability of each to enhance self-realization are mutually dependent, not exclusive.

All this stands in direct contrast to those who implicitly or explicitly equate freedom with freedom of capital, who see rights in terms of the power some can wield over others. The struggles of the early 1960s were fought in these terms; would society uphold the right of some to discriminate against others, or uphold the right of all to be treated with dignity. The terms of that conflict only deepened in subsequent years as purely verbal, paper equality came no closer to making it a reality than do our formal democratic norms enable citizens to exercise meaningful control over how government acts. Needless to say (though perhaps needed to be said), from this point of view the same line of difference can be drawn in the contrast between democratic values and imperial arrogance in the war in Vietnam – and which today finds expression in the opposing sides in the war against Iraq.

This is consistent with King's understanding of freedom as something creative, not as something to be bought by some at the expense of others, but as something to be made possible for everyone. Unfortunately, we live in an era made noticeable by limitations on freedom and democracy; the assault on traditional rights in the name of national security, prepared earlier by corporate power ever more entrenched in law and custom, with choice reduced as a passive decision between us and them ("reds," "terrorists," the "enemy"), between candidate A or candidate B, as between one product for sale or another. In fact, what we can choose to buy is supposed to compensate for the paucity of choices in other spheres of life. Relentless commercialization invades every facet of being such that the marketplace becomes the purveyor of all values, a price-tag set on everything; personal and political relationships subordinated to the unending need to consume. These trends were already in place when King lived, the alternative he called for, even if seemingly more distant today than then, more necessary than ever:

I am convinced that if we get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution in values. 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, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

The morality put forward by conservative policymakers (and conservative preachers) is proclaimed as an abstract ideal standing outside people, enforced by external authority as a means to set limits on personal behavior. Or, more to the point, as behavior can't truly be legislated out of existence, the goal is to drive what is condemned out of sight; the cutting edge of a repressive society. Social concerns, social realities are ignored in the process, a focus is instead placed on a cruel (and hypocritical) denial of sexuality – thus

the condemnation of abortion, gay marriage, the preaching of abstinence to the young in lieu of sex education – all reflections of just how far from a “person-oriented” society we have become.

Behind the self-righteousness this entails is the presumption that the poor are poor in consequence of their individual “failings” – “failings” which the regulation of sexual behavior is supposed to overcome. An equation that removes de-industrialization, decline in social spending or institutional racism as the reason so many live in want. Equally ignored is the contrast between the struggle so many face to make ends meet with the conspicuous consumption of a favored few. Ignored, though, is the wrong word, for the celebration of wealth is as much a part of contemporary culture, was as much a part of Bush’s presidential campaigns, as was the condemnation of what is defined as sin. Values comfortable with hierarchies of class and gender are values opposite and opposed to those envisioned by King.

As is a morality that celebrates war as a positive value. Our government’s presumption that it has the right to decide who will live or die abroad based on the dictates of a narrow, class-bound perception of national security is justified in a similar vein as is the denunciation of *Roe v. Wade*. An abstract morality serves as an excuse to impose by force the priorities of corporations and ideologues, to ignore double standards such as that which rationalizes our weapons of mass destruction, yet sees in others’ possible possession of them an excuse for war.

That double standard by which we hold our actions abroad as compared to how we judge actions of other countries is analogous to the double standard upon which discrimination functions; it is the hallmark of a system in which some judge, others are judged. Double standards more or less veiled until a critical reflection of past and present throws light on all the hidden assumptions that justify the injustices daily committed. Such rethinking is a key to building a movement capable of taking actions to make our society something other, something more humane, than what it has become.

III.

Thus the need for the “revolution in values” King demanded. The transition from a “thing-oriented” to a “person-oriented” society means that value would lie not in our possessions but in who we are, not in the power we wield over others but in the relationships of trust and affection we can build. Rather than see whole categories of people as other than ourselves, accept existing patterns of domination and subordination, the foundations of the structures they create (recreate) such divisions could be (will have to be) replaced by those which would allow us to see each as akin to all.

King’s “Breaking the Silence” speech was not given simply as moral exhortation, it was offered as a contribution to the building of the movement to bring about changes his indictment indicated were so greatly needed. Linking his opposition to the war against Vietnam to the battles then raging against racism and economic injustice, King

foreshadowed the organizing to follow in the Poor People's Campaign. That attempt to directly engage those who suffer most from society's inequities in a movement that aimed toward building an alternative is itself still relevant to what needs to be again attempted.

An attempt that will only be successful when we see the systemic character of the seemingly discrete issues we each face as individuals. King's message spoke to this when he defined exactly what he meant by a "revolution in values.":

A true revolution in 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 upon to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be 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 is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution in values will soon look at the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the sea 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 social betterment of the countries and say: "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the local gentry of Latin 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 in values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: "This is not just." The business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into veins of people 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.

As it was, so it is, signs of the "spiritual death" King spoke of are all around us; evident not only in the torture of prisoners, but the ease with which that torture is rationalized. The details may differ from Vietnam to Iraq; the dying continues. Agent Orange or depleted uranium; that death is dealt out with no remorse, no sense of responsibility, no accountability. The prerogative of empire is to wrap up its violence in a flag of glory; as with all empires there is a cost that can be delayed by which must be paid. We see it in the fraying of our own society; we saw it vividly in New Orleans, we will see it in the costs our grandchildren will have to pay if that Jericho Road is not transformed.

Yet we need remember that King's speech, his indictment of all the ills he identifies, was not given a spirit of despair; it was rather a message of hope that through determined

actions needed changes could be brought about. The year 1967 was in fact the year that anti-war protests – that spring in New York, that fall at the Pentagon – became truly broad-based, laid the ground upon which more massive protests would build.

Therefore remembering the war in Vietnam should not only mean remembering the horror it was, but also the possibility of social reform it helped derail. It means remembering too the vision of a more fundamental alternative which took shape those years and was so central to the perspective King developed. His legacy, the legacy of others who then raised their voices, is best acknowledged by confronting the war in Iraq in the horror it is, by asserting a commitment to freedom, democracy, equality, as embodied in a “person-centered” world; the demand that all be able to live a life of dignity. Therein lies the possibility of a path by which the entire edifice of our system can be transformed, a world in which the rebirth of “true compassion” can challenge the all-too-evident “spiritual death” of these days, pointing a direction toward a time when hope can have concrete meaning for all.

IV.

So we return to the present, a present in which Judge Weinstein, clearly guided by values other than those enunciated by King, can so easily dismiss the Vietnamese Agent Orange lawsuit. Of greater significance, the decision did not cause a public outcry, a clear sign of just how far from the revolution in values King fought for (and died for) we are today. Yet until such a revolution occurs, no concession is likely to any charges like those – for to acknowledge that we committed war crimes in Vietnam, that the war itself was criminal, would open a Pandora’s box of questions those in authority would prefer to keep closed. After all, it would be hard to justify acting as the world’s policeman, to kill with impunity, when that impunity no longer exists.

A different verdict on the war in Vietnam than that conceded by government circles then or now was given by the Bertrand Russell Tribunal held in 1967 at Copenhagen and Stockholm. Documenting those U.S. war crimes in Vietnam, it left a record which persists to challenge the historical amnesia of presidents, cabinet officers, Congressional leaders, generals, corporate executives who perpetuate the same illegal acts over and over again. Appropriately, the Russell tribunal inspired those making a similar documentation of the illegal and immoral war the U.S. is now engaged in, in Iraq.

Concluding in Istanbul this past June 24-27, the World Tribunal in Iraq held sessions in 20 different countries over the past two years, both eyewitnesses and technical reports laying bare the nature of the war. Like its predecessor, this body had no legal standing and expected no response by officials; rather, as its chair Arundhati Roy has made clear, it is a call to action to people to end injustice, for popular action alone is the source of real change. Although generating extensive press coverage in much of the world, the meetings were virtually ignored by the mainstream press in the U.S. – limiting its impact here and perhaps making such gestures appear Quixotic, futile, or so those who are cynical or merely defeated might suggest. Futile, as the opposition of King and others

once seemed when neither eloquence, logic nor public action was able to stop the Vietnam war. The difficulty of the struggle for peace and justice, however, should not serve as an excuse for giving in to despair, as an excuse to accept war, poverty and injustice as inevitable.

Expressing the meaning of what the World Tribunal on Iraq was attempting to do – in terms that speak equally to the continued importance of acknowledging what we did in Vietnam – were these thoughts of writer/critic John Berger included in the event’s program: “The records have to be kept and, by definition, the perpetrators, far from keeping records, try to destroy them. They are killers of the innocent and of memory. The records are required to inspire still further the mounting opposition to the new global tyranny. The new tyrants, incomparably overarmed, can win every war – both military and economic. Yet they are losing the war (this is how they call it) of communication. They are not winning the support of world public opinion. More and more people are saying no. Finally this will be the tyranny’s undoing. But after how many more tragedies, invasions and collateral disasters? After how much more of the new poverty the tyranny engenders? Hence the urgency of keeping records, of remembering, of assembling the evidence, so that the accusations become unforgettable, and proverbial on every continent. More and more people are going to say no, for this is the precondition today for saying yes to all we are determined to save and everything we love.”

For the very reasons Berger presents, we need remember too the war in Vietnam and its human cost, we need remember what Martin Luther King opposed, what he advocated. The same mentality that led to the use of napalm, of tiger cages, or Agent Orange is on full display at the Abu Gharib and Guantanamo – as are the same falsehoods, same denial of responsibility, same quickness to turn the page. Those who wish to bury history will never be fully successful so long as consciousness of what happened lives on amongst people (even when numbering only a few) who refuse to forget.

Ultimately, a long road lies ahead on the journey toward a “revolution in values,” a recapturing of the past joined with a commitment to a future where human need, human desire, hold centerplace. A difficult road, no doubt, nonetheless, every glimpse of what is taking place, alongside every glimpse of what could be, makes clear the high cost of doing nothing. Peace, equality, a democracy of the many, not the few, all appear far too distant at present; whatever that distance may be, it can only be reduced by how we act on what we remember, what we know. Therein lies the hope contained in King’s words, hope that lives despite what was done to Vietnam, is being done to Iraq, hope that can grow despite everything.

SOURCES

Statistics on casualties and the impact of the bombing on Vietnam come from Edward Tick’s “Fallen Leaves, Broken Lives” (Utne Reader, Jan.-Feb. 2005). Tick’s article includes a listing of his sources. In addition, *Unwinding the Vietnam War: From War to Peace*, edited by Reese Williams (Real Comet Press, Seattle, 1987), contains a fact sheet

with statistics comparable to those Tick cites. Quotations from Martin Luther King's "Breaking the Silence" speech are from a reprint included in the Williams volume.

Further information specific to Agent Orange was included in "At Last Vietnam Has Reason to Rejoice" by Jonathan Watts (Guardian Weekly, May 6-12, 2005). Facts about the lawsuit dismissal, as well as Judge Weinstein's opinion, are from "Civil Lawsuit on Defoliant in Vietnam is Dismissed" by William Glaberson (New York Times, March 11, 2005).

Material on the World Tribunal in Iraq is from "The World Speaks on Iraq" by Richard Falk (The Nation, Aug. 1-8, 2005) and "World Tribunal on Iraq" by Ustan B. Reinart (Z Magazine, July-Aug, 2005). Reinart's article includes the quotation from John Berger.