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King and Obama at the Just Peace Nexus

April 4, 1967, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous speech against the Vietnam War at Riverside Church in New York City. April 4, 1968 King was shot and killed. The bullet could kill the prophet for justice and peace. It could take from earthly life a civil rights leader who understood that war and peace was a civil rights and a human rights issue. No justice, no peace. However, the bullet could not kill the prophetic vision. It could not kill King's audacious faith in humankind and its ability to move toward a more peaceful world. It is not possible to shoot an idea and an ideal.

December 10, 2009, President Barack Obama, the first African-American president of the United States, accepted the Nobel Peace Prize. In his Nobel Lecture, he spoke about the debt he owed to Martin Luther King, and he spoke about just war and just peace. King, also a Nobel Laureate, and Obama are at once very different and very much alike. King was a pacifist committed to nonviolence. Obama is a pragmatist committed to nonviolence if possible but to violence if necessary. King was a preacher in the prophetic tradition. He was a witness whose power was eloquence and an unwavering moral conviction accountable to a transcendent universal morality. King could measure the righteousness of the nation's actions with both a practical and a utopian yardstick.

Conversely, Obama spoke as president of the United States of America. His power is the power of the Commander-in-Chief of the most potent military apparatus on the face of the planet. He too measures the righteousness of the nation's action with both a practical and utopian measure. But, in a sense, his power more limited than King's. His accountability is more immediate, more narrow and restrictive. Obama is a politician who, in the near term, is accountable to voters of the United States. In the long term he is accountable to history. Thus he must walk a fine line between moral requirements of the world as it is and the world as it ought to be.

Still, the life, work, and words of the prophet influence the policies of the politician. When we read the texts of the two speeches side by side, there are clearly places where the two roles of these men place them in opposition. Yet, there are also moments of convergence. King's pacifism and Obama's understanding of just war meet at the just peace nexus.

In 1967 King spoke before the organization Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, an interreligious organization opposed to the Vietnam War. King spoke of being driven by his conscience, by "the demands of inner truth." It was not easy for him to take a stand against his country in a time of war. At the same time, he was happy to see people of faith taking a stand. He said:

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.

King was hoping for a new way. He intended his remarks not only for the group present in the Riverside Church that day, but he intended his remarks for his fellow Americans. He gave his reasons for opposing the war. It took resources from the poor. The burden of fighting it fell disproportionately on the poor. African-American and European-American warriors could fight and die side by side in Vietnam, but they returned to a segregated United States when their time in the theater of war was over. He opposed the war for the sake of moral consistency. He could not preach nonviolence to those engaged in violent rebellion in America's cities and remain silent about the nation's violence in war. He saw war as a poison to the nation's soul. He spoke out because he was a Nobel Laureate, and he considered that "a commission" that bestowed upon him a responsibility "beyond national allegiances." He understood his calling as a minister of Jesus Christ to be one of peacemaking.

He questioned those who thought that his speaking out against the war as outside of his areas of expertise or responsibility. He asked:

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?

King understood his ministerial call to be one that required him to speak out for God's "suffering and helpless and outcast children." King was not interested in ideology or about which government wins. He was interested in the people whose lives were crushed due to the realities of war.

In this speech, King rehearsed the history of the Vietnam conflict including America's rejection of "a revolutionary government seeking self-determination." According to King's analysis, the new government would have meant land reform that would have improved the economic development of the poor. Sustainable economic development is a just peace principle. The United States supported French Colonialism in Vietnam. And it supported Premier Diem, who King called "one of the most vicious modern dictators."

The U.S. promised peace, democracy and land reform, but the people only saw corrupt, inept, and unpopular governments against a backdrop of more war. As a tactic of war the U.S. poisoned water and destroyed crops and trees. Children died or were made homeless, left to run the street in packs. In war institutions as well as people die. Families, villages and religious institutions were sometimes fatally wounded. King said: "We have supported the enemies of the peasants of Saigon. We have corrupted their women and children and killed their men."

Moreover, King sought to understand the enemy. He listed what he thought might be their legitimate grievances: U.S. support for Diem, U.S. violence and the supply of weapons into the country. He questioned the legitimacy of a government where all political parties were not included. Here King articulated another basic principle of just peace theory before it was systematized as such, i.e. the importance of respecting the point-of-view of the enemy and the importance of inclusion in the democratic process. He said:

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 this 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

Another just peace principle that we see in King's address is the principle of truth-telling. It is important to remember history because the enemy Other has most assuredly not forgotten. He urged the United States to remember Vietnam's struggle for independence from the Japanese and from the French. America ought not to forget its role in preventing elections that would have brought Ho Chi Minh to power. The truth is also important for the psychological well-being of America's own warriors. King argued that when warriors see the truth about why they were sent to war, that they were sent to defend the interests of the wealthy in a distant civil war, that they will become cynical. He said: "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."

Just peace theory calls upon one side to be willing to take independent initiative to bring peace. This is a matter of self-respect. It is a matter of courage. King said: "I speak of 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." King thought that it was important for the U.S. to admit that it was wrong to enter the Vietnam conflict and that our part in the war had done harm to the Vietnamese people. This admonition contains three just peace principle in one gesture—truth, repentance and independent initiatives for peace.

King outlined five specific and concrete steps to end the war. He called for: an end to bombing; a unilateral cease fire; curtailing the military buildup in Thailand and Laos; negotiations with the National Liberation Front and an expectation that they will be a part of the government; a date certain for withdrawal according to the 1954 Geneva Agreement. He further called for an offer of asylum to those who would face retribution from the Liberation Front and for the U.S. to pay reparations. All of these suggestions have a home in just peace theory.

King wanted religious communities and clergy to counsel young men to protest the war by becoming conscientious objectors. He wanted young men to become living and not dead sacrifices for their country. "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 human convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions, but we must all protest."

However, arguably, the most powerful and enduring insight that King spoke was his observation that the war was a symptom of a deeper American problem. He called for a revolution of values. He said that America was a thing-oriented rather than a person-oriented society. He spoke of the triple evils of racism, extreme materialism and militarism that plague our society. He called for a commitment to social justice that was beyond personal charity. He wanted to see systemic change. "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

Just peace theory says that a true revolution of values requires truth, respect and justice. Security will come when these virtues are in place. According to King, a true revolution of values would not only extract natural resources from developing countries but would also provide for the economic development of those countries. A true revolution of values would learn from other civilizations, reject war and spend more money on social uplift rather than military defense.

King wanted the United States to remain active in the United Nations and to reject fear of communism that caused the nation to lose its own revolutionary impulse. He said: "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." He preached love, the "fierce urgency of now" and warned of "power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight." King wanted us to know that peace is a choice, and the brotherhood of humankind is our work to do.

Forty-two years after this speech, President Barack Obama stood in Oslo to give his Nobel Lecture. In those 42 years, King had become one of the most celebrated human beings in the world. In the United States, a national holiday has been established in his honor. His life and writing are taught in schools across the globe. His work to make the ideal of liberty and justice for all a reality helped to open the doors of opportunity for people such as Barack Obama.

President Obama opened his remarks with recognition that humanity has the power to "bend history in the direction of justice." It seemed that he began where King had ended –with the possibility of human decisions moving the world toward justice. He recognized that his duties as Commander-in-Chief meant that he would have to deploy men and women into battle to kill and to die. He spoke of just war and of the criteria whereby a war may be considered justified – last resort, self-defense, proportional use of force, civilians not intentionally targeted for violence. In giving this explanation, he acknowledged that "this concept of 'just war' was rarely observed."

President Obama's reading of the history of warfare showed that humankind is reluctant to show mercy to those who are different. Even in war we consider to be "just" civilians suffer. He said: "And while it's hard to conceive of a cause more just than the defeat of the Third Reich and the Axis powers, World War II was a conflict in which the total number of civilians who died exceeded the number of soldiers who perished."

The president spoke about the Marshall Plan, the United Nations, treaties to ensure human rights and to prevent genocide, and restrictions on the most dangerous weapons. There have been wars and atrocities since World War II, but according to President Obama: "The ideals of liberty and self-determination, equality and rule of law have haltingly advanced."

Yet, nuclear proliferation and terrorism still make this a dangerous world. Civilians face conflicts within nations and civilians still die in higher numbers than soldiers. Like King, President Obama called for new ways of thinking:

I do not bring with me today a definitive solution to the problems of war. What I do know is that meeting these challenges will require the same vision, hard work, and persistence of those men and women who acted so boldly decades ago. And it will require us to think in new ways about the notions of just war and the imperatives of a just peace.

President Obama paid homage to Martin Luther King's thinking about the futility of violence, yet his responsibilities as a head of state require him to admit that sometimes force may be necessary. However, even in the face of the deployment of the military for the sake of security, President Obama is not deluded by the glamour of war.

So yes, the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace. And yet this truth must coexist with another – that no matter how justified, war promises human tragedy. The soldier's courage and sacrifice is full of glory, expressing devotion to country, to cause, to comrades in arms. But war itself is never glorious, and we must never trumpet it as such.

While King called for a revolution of values, following the lead of President John Kennedy. Obama spoke about "A gradual evolution of human institutions." He wants to see more international standards for violent conflict. He wants to see an international response to aggression and the deployment of force for humanitarian reasons. International cooperation is an important aspect of just peace. It shows respect for other countries and for multi-national organizations. He said:

Peace requires responsibility. Peace entails sacrifice. That's why NATO continues to be indispensable. That's why we must strengthen U.N. and regional peacekeeping, and not leave the task to a few countries.

President Obama wants the United States to conduct itself with propriety during war, *jus in bello*. He pointed to his orders to prohibit torture, to his efforts to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, and to his commitment to abide by the Geneva Conventions.

Just peace is the daily effort to make and to keep the peace. It is the work of preventing conflict from getting to the point where we think war is necessary. It seeks to prevent the crisis. President Obama articulated three ways to “build a just and lasting peace.” All three are just peace principles. First, he called for more international cooperation in bringing nonviolent pressure to bear on nations that break international agreements. This includes the proliferation of nuclear weapons and genocide. He said: “Yes, there will be engagement; yes, there will be diplomacy –but there must be consequences when these things fail. And the closer we stand together, the less likely we will be faced with the choice between armed intervention and complicity in oppression.”

Second, President Obama spoke of a just peace based on respect for human rights. He stressed the importance of right to free speech, worship, assembly and democratic elections. He spoke of the idea of democratic peace, the notion that democracies do not go to war with each other. He made it clear that universal rights do not negate cultural particularity. He gave support to Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma and to Zimbabweans who face repression from their government. Yet, he still respects these governments enough to advocate “painstaking diplomacy” saying: “No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door.”

Third, he recognized economic development as an essential element of just peace. He underlined the connection between economic security and security from violent conflict. He said:

It is undoubtedly true that development rarely takes root without security; it is also true that security does not exist where human beings do not have access to enough food, or clean water, or the medicine and shelter they need to survive. It does not exist where children can't aspire to a decent education or a job that supports a family. The absence of hope can rot a society from within.

He continued by saying that climate change is a security issue because of drought, famine and mass displacement that it causes.

Just as King's speech called for a revolution of values, arguably the most prophetic section of President Obama's lecture was his call for an expanded moral imagination. He called for a moral imagination that would allow humankind to see beyond the finite facts of identity that separate us and focus on the law of love that helps us to see the Other as part of our own identity. This commands us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. He said:

We do not have to live in an idealized world to still reach for those ideals that will make it a better place. The non-violence practiced by men like Gandhi and King may not have been practical or possible in every circumstance, but the love they preached—their fundamental faith in human progress—that must always be the North Star that guides us on our journey.

It is rare to hear a world leader speak of faith in love and in human possibilities within the context of speaking about war and peace. He echoed King's Nobel Lecture by calling for humankind to strive for a world as it ought to be. He concluded by saying that while we face the realities, the "is-ness" of a world filled with violence, that we can still strive for peace."

Both King and Obama wanted to issue the clarion call for all of humanity to become peacemakers no matter their role or station in life. Both saw the importance of international cooperation in peacemaking, for the importance of truth telling and the advancement of human rights. Both wanted free and fair elections that included all political parties in a society, even those who may not agree with the United States. Both saw the need for economic development as a way to foster peace in both the near and in the long term. Both spoke of the law of love and the importance of not only recognition of the Other, but of respect for and even love for the Other.

These two men are not the only ones to see the importance of these principles. Other peacemakers have proposed them. This shows that human beings the ingredients that will make peace. Our work now is to summon the imagination, the will and the courage to do it. Every day. Everywhere. Every one.