

What Martin Luther King Really Said

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Preaching to Black ministers assembled in Memphis on November 13, 1993, President Clinton told them--and the nation--what Martin Luther King "would say" about ghetto violence if he were now to return twenty-five years after being assassinated. Like a ventriloquist, the President put these words in the mouth of Dr. King: "I did not live and die to see young people destroy their own lives with drugs and then build fortunes destroying the lives of others. . . . I did not fight for the right of black people to murder other black people with reckless abandonment." Dr. King's gospel, according to the President, seems to be that the main causes of ghetto violence are the inhabitants of the ghetto.

If President Clinton believes this is what Martin Luther King would have said on this subject, he must not remember what he did say:

"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. . . . They asked 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."

In the twenty-six years since Dr. King spoke these words in his great April 4, 1967 sermon about U.S. militarism and imperialism, his analysis of the interrelations between U.S. global policies and the most severe domestic problems has become more and more telling. President Clinton's rhetorical stance assumed that Dr. King would be surprised by what he would see if he returned today.

But in fact King predicted these conditions as consequences of "American life and policy," for "racism, materialism, and militarism" will continue to grow so long as "machines and computers, profit and property rights are considered more important than people." The fundamental cause of ghetto violence, according to Dr. King's actual, rather than fantasized, words, is that our nation is on the "wrong side of a world revolution," fighting globally to protect "the immense profits of overseas investment" gained through the emiseration of poor and working people abroad and at home.

Martin Luther King decried the alliance between our nation and the "landed gentry" of Latin America, which has led to an intercontinental "pattern of suppression." He pointed unwaveringly at the "glaring contrast of poverty and wealth," most visible to its victims throughout the Third World, including the ghettos and barrios of the United States. He castigated the global warfare waged by America against the revolutionary aspirations of peoples of color. "The need to main-

tain social stability for our investments accounts for the counterrevolutionary action of American forces," and for "American helicopters" and "American napalm and green beret forces" being used against people in Latin America and Asia who "are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression." At the very core of all this, embodying the nation's deepest sickness, Dr. King saw America's war against Vietnam: "If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read `Vietnam.'"

In the quarter century since Dr. King's murder, the United States has: devastated Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia far more savagely than in the years before his death; helped a terrorist junta overthrow the legally elected government of Chile; invaded and occupied Grenada; bombed Libya; sacked Panama to replace one former U.S. stooge with a more compliant replacement; organized the overthrow of a Nicaraguan government committed to ending the exploitation King denounced; armed, trained, and financed a terrorist regime in El Salvador; slaughtered at least one hundred thousand people in Iraq to punish a dictator armed by Washington; killed hundreds of civilians in Somalia; covertly financed a drug-running military cabal in Haiti; and worked remorselessly to annihilate Latin America's most successful health and education system in Cuba.

President Clinton's main theme, enunciated in his opening sentence, was "the great crisis of the spirit that is gripping America today." When he was alive and could not be used as a ventriloquist's dummy, Martin Luther King eloquently named and predicted this crisis: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." For him, the violence in the ghetto is the direct product of our nation's betrayal of its "promise of hope for the poor" and a clear manifestation of "a society gone mad on war." 

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