

A Revolution of Values

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The war in Iraq is increasingly raising the specter of Vietnam. In anticipation of Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, and in the wake of the post-election discussion of moral values, it seems timely to consider why the war in Vietnam prompted King to call for “a revolution of values.”

King raised this idea in a talk entitled “A Time to Break Silence.” The civil rights leader had decided formally to come out against the Vietnam War. He did so because he made a connection between the war and the struggle for justice and civil rights at home.

King believed that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies to overcome poverty so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to siphon away people and resources. The costs of the conflict in Iraq now approach similar significance. As this war disintegrates into prolonged conflict, we should not neglect *its* growing financial and moral costs. Financially, the cost of the war is approaching \$150 billion. With that money, for example, we could give 89.5 million children health insurance; hire 2.5 million schoolteachers; give 7.2 million students four-year scholarships to public universities; or fully fund global anti-hunger efforts for six years.

Montana’s share of the war cost so far is \$235 million. Of course, that is only money spent to date. We still have a long way to go. From these figures, you can begin to get a sense of why a person like King was so concerned about the costs of wars abroad. As President Eisenhower said so eloquently before him, “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”

The financial cost, of course, is the least of it, relative to the more than 1,000 American lives lost, 7,000 soldiers injured, and, lest we forget, the 40,000 to 100,000 innocent Iraqi lives lost through our war against terrorism. And as we drain money from programs for the poor, we also increasingly rely on the poor to risk their lives on our behalf, just as they did in Vietnam.

But Martin Luther King, Jr. was also concerned for how war affects our moral values. He said that a country that continues to spend more on military affairs than social programs is approaching a spiritual death. It is a death reflected by an initial paltry \$15 million offered for victims of the Asian tsunami. It is a death reflected by 43 million Americans without adequate health insurance.

In addition, King was struck by how our policies abroad were not effective at alleviating the conditions that produce more people committed to fighting us, and not winning the peace in the hearts and minds of people we were liberating. If a militaristic image of America is the one the world is all too willing to accept as representing our

values, despite our best intentions, we are fighting a war that on our own moral terms is becoming unjust.

King argued instead for a revolution of values. He argued that when machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the evils of racism, materialism, and militarism will not be defeated. A revolution of values is not merely playing the Good Samaritan for the beggar on the road, King said. It is seeing that the road itself must be transformed so that people are no longer beaten or robbed. It is looking uneasily on the glaring contrast between poverty and wealth.

You might say that whether the Iraq war was justified or not, it is a war we are stuck with—a job we must finish without failure, no matter what the cost. That may be true.

But unless we can accomplish at least something of King's revolution in values, a militaristic drive to find security any cost will increasingly blind us to the conditions of injustice at home and in the breeding grounds of terrorism abroad.

Now that our elections are past, we have new opportunities to become leaders in that revolution of values—just as King called for us to do. The new government in Helena offers us an opportunity, for example, to fund fully the Montana Children's Health Insurance Program and provide health coverage for all Montanans. In short, as we ponder the policy choices now facing us in Washington and Helena, let us be sure, as King reminded us, that our own best values at home not become the latest casualties of a war abroad.

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