

President Johnson Justifies U.S. Intervention in Vietnam

In this speech delivered at Johns Hopkins University on April 7, 1965, President Johnson lists the reasons for escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Having secured Congressional authorization with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Johnson launched a bombing campaign in the north and in March 1965, dispatched 3,500 marines to South Vietnam. With this speech, Johnson laid the political groundwork for a major commitment of U.S. troops.

April 7, 1965

The world as it is in Asia is not a serene or peaceful place.

The first reality is that North Vietnam has attacked the independent nation of South Vietnam. Its object is total conquest.

Of course, some of the people of South Vietnam are participating in attack on their own government. But trained men and supplies, orders and arms, flow in a constant stream from north to south.

This support is the heartbeat of the war.

And it is a war of unparalleled brutality. Simple farmers are the targets of assassination and kidnapping. Women and children are strangled in the night because their men are loyal to their government. And helpless villages are ravaged by sneak attacks. Large-scale raids are conducted on towns, and terror strikes in the heart of cities...

Over this war—and all Asia—is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking. This is a regime which has destroyed freedom in Tibet, which has attacked India, and has been condemned by the United Nations for aggression in Korea. It is a nation which is helping the forces of violence in almost every continent. The contest in Vietnam is part of a wider pattern of aggressive purposes.

Why are these realities our concern? Why are we in South Vietnam?

We are there because we have a promise to keep. Since 1954 every American President has offered support to the people of South Vietnam...

We are also there to strengthen world order. Around the globe, from Berlin to Thailand, are people whose well-being rests, in part, on the belief that they can count on us if they are attacked. To leave Vietnam to its fate would shake

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the confidence of all these people in the value of an American commitment and in the value of America's word. The result would be increased unrest and instability, and even wider war.

We are also there because there are great stakes in the balance. Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Vietnam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another. The central lesson of our time is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next...

In recent months attacks on South Vietnam were stepped up. Thus, it became necessary for us to increase our response and to make attacks by air. This is not a change of purpose. It is a change in what we believe that purpose requires.

We do this in order to slow down aggression.

We do this to increase the confidence of the brave people of South Vietnam who have bravely borne this brutal battle for so many years with so many casualties.

And we do this to convince the leaders of North Vietnam—and all who seek to share their conquest—of a very simple fact: We will not be defeated. We will not grow tired.

*American Social History Project/Center for Media Learning
Lyndon B. Johnson, "President Johnson Justifies U.S. Intervention in Vietnam"
HERB: Resources for Teachers: <http://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1242>*

Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence

On April 4, 1967, Martin Luther King delivered his first major public statement against the Vietnam War, entitled “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence.” Addressing a crowd of 3,000 at Riverside Church in New York City, King condemned the war as anti-democratic, impractical, and unjust. He described the daily suffering of Vietnamese peasants caught in the crossfire, as well as the human and economic burdens being placed on America’s poor. Not only were lower-class Americans more likely to fight in Vietnam, but Johnson’s domestic “War on Poverty,” designed to help poor families, was being derailed by U.S. foreign policy. King called for an immediate end to the bombing and a negotiated peace settlement with Vietnam. Although some activists supported King’s opposition to the war, many were concerned that the speech would be perceived as unpatriotic and hinder the civil rights struggle by connecting it to the more radical peace movement.

For those who ask the question, “Aren’t you a civil rights leader?” and thereby mean to exclude me from the movement for peace, I have this further answer. In 1957 when a group of us formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, we chose as our motto: “To save the soul of America.” We were convinced that we could not limit our vision to certain rights for black people, but instead affirmed the conviction that America would never be free or saved from itself until the descendants of its slaves were loosed completely from the shackles they still wear. In a way we were agreeing with Langston Hughes, that black bard of Harlem, who had written earlier:

O, yes,
I say it plain,
American never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath —
America will be!

Now, it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America’s soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read: Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over. So it is that those of us who are yet determined that America will be are led down the path of protest and dissent, working for the health of our land.

As if the weight of such a commitment to the life and health of America were not enough, another burden of responsibility was placed upon me in 1954 [sic]; and I cannot forget that the Nobel Prize for Peace was also a commission—a commission to work harder than I had ever worked before for “the brotherhood of man.” This is a calling that takes me beyond national allegiances, but even if it were not present I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me

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why I'm speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the good news was meant for all men—for Communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? 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?

And finally, as I try to explain for you and for myself the road that leads from Montgomery to this place I would have offered all that was most valid if I simply said that I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men the calling to be a son of the living God. Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood, and because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come tonight to speak for them.

This I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation and for those it calls "enemy," for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.

*American Social History Project/Center for Media Learning
Martin Luther King Jr., "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence"
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