



Continuing to Break the Silence: Learning and Reflection on Vietnam, Palestine, and Beyond

On April 4, 1967 – one year to the day before his assassination – Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a landmark speech at The Riverside Church in New York City. “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” was arguably one of his most important, and easily one of his most controversial, speeches. The late Rep. John Lewis, who attended and had heard Dr. King speak countless times, [later said of the speech](#), “I still think this is probably the best.”

In the wake of the speech, Dr. King was widely denounced by policy makers, other civil rights and social movement leaders, and the press. Over 160 newspapers published editorials criticizing him, as well as the facts and arguments he had laid out. In its [editorial titled “Dr. King’s Error,”](#) *The New York Times’s* opinion was representative of the backlash: “This is a fusing of two public problems that are distinct and separate. By drawing them together, Dr. King has done a disservice to both. The moral issues in Vietnam are less clear-cut than he suggests; the political strategy of uniting the peace movement and the civil rights movement could very well be disastrous for both causes.”

On January 19, 2019, civil rights lawyer, legal scholar, and New York Times columnist Michelle Alexander – renowned for her 2010 book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* – published an op-ed that explicitly built on the lessons of Dr. King’s 1967 speech. Her piece, [“Time to Break the Silence on Palestine,”](#) insisted the time had come to follow his example on “this grave injustice of our time.”

The response to her call echoed the condemnation of King. She, too, came in for widespread condemnation. Israeli politicians and establishment Jewish groups in the United States were especially critical. The reaction of Michael Oren, a member of the Israeli parliament and former Israeli ambassador to the U.S., was representative: “By equating support for Israel with support for the Vietnam War and opposition to MLK, Alexander dangerously deligitimizes [sic] us. It’s a strategic threat and Israel must treat it as such.”

But what are the parallels between these global injustices and Dr. King’s and Michelle Alexander’s breaking of their silences on them in the United States? What can we learn by examining Dr. King’s speech and Alexander’s op-ed together? Where do Dr. King’s lessons and warnings endure? And how does Alexander bring his call from 1967 into today?

The following prompts and questions aim to provide ways for communities, congregations, and classrooms to explore these texts and the issues they raise for us and 21st century struggles for peace and justice.

Note to facilitators: *The full text of “Beyond Vietnam” is lengthy, so [this version](#) prepared by the King and Breaking Silence coalition is especially helpful for reading and discussion in a group setting. It is split into 16 sections for different readers and includes helpful thematic subheadings. The reader numbers noted for the quotes below refer to these sections. For a Spanish translation of the full speech, [click here](#).*

[King and Breaking Silence](#) is an “intergenerational call for unity and action” hosted by the National Council of Elders and supported by over 50 organizations including American Muslim Voice Foundation, Council on American-Islamic Relations-California, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Highlander Center, National Black Justice Coalition, National Civil Rights Museum, National Council of Churches, Pace e Bene/Campaign Nonviolence, Poor People’s Campaign, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, SNCC Legacy Project, Tewa Women United, Unitarian Universalist Association, and World Beyond War. The initiative organizes anniversary readings and discussions of Dr. King’s Riverside Church speech each year.

Prompts and questions to guide reading and discussion of
[“Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence”](#) alongside [“Time to Break the Silence on Palestine”](#)

On breaking silence

Dr. King noted that it’s only with great difficulty that the “human spirit move[s] ... against all the apathy of conformist thought within one’s own bosom and in the surrounding world” (Reader 1). Alexander reflects on how silence can “better serve our personal interests or the communities and causes we hold most dear.”

- Who does Dr. King lift up for finally speaking out?
- Who does he question for remaining silent?
- Who does Alexander point out as having, like her, remained silent? What reasons does she give for their silence? What analysis of them does she offer? What do you think of these reasons?
- Who does Alexander lift up as examples of speaking out? Did you know of these people and organizations before? Why are they significant?
- Who are the people who have paid a price for breaking silence on Palestine? What were the consequences for them of speaking out? How did they respond?
- If you’re not already familiar with their efforts, take this opportunity to learn about former Israeli soldiers who have committed themselves to [Breaking the Silence](#); this is the name of their organization, which exposes the abuses that mark daily life for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and aims to end the occupation.
- What does the challenge to break silence mean to you? What are the spaces in your life where you know you are called to do this? How do these writings of Dr. King and Michelle Alexander provide concrete advice you can follow? What do you still need to figure out?

On the responsibility of people in United States

From the outset, Dr. King is explicit that he is making “a passionate plea to [his] beloved nation,” that he is speaking to his “fellow Americans” (Reader 2). And he is clear of the task before any people who see themselves as “bound by allegiances and loyalties ... broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation’s self-defined goals and positions;” he tells us, “We are called to speak for ... the victims of our nation and for those it calls ‘enemy’” (Reader 5). Alexander pledges to “stand in solidarity with struggles for democracy and freedom.”

- Where else in both texts do we see King and Alexander offering insights about how and why people in the United States can and should take a stand on the side of justice for people in Vietnam, in Palestine, and elsewhere?
- In the more contemporary Alexander piece, what are some of the specific efforts and actions in which people can get involved?

On the role of the U.S. government

In “Beyond Vietnam,” Dr. King famously and unequivocally identifies his country’s own government as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today” (Reader 4). And to policy makers, he says directly: “The great initiative in this war is ours; the initiative to stop it must be ours” (Reader 10).

- Where in her op-ed does Alexander point specifically to the role of the United States in supporting Israel in its occupation of Palestine and its violence against Palestinians? What examples does she present of U.S. complicity in this violence?

- How do these examples reveal opportunities for people in the United States to take action to change their own government's policies?

On the human cost to people in Vietnam and Palestine

A significant portion of Dr. King's speech describes and analyzes Vietnam's long quest for independence from western colonial powers and the repeated transgressions of France and the United States in particular. But he begins this section of the speech by centering the people of Vietnam, "who have been living under the curse of war for almost three continuous decades now" (Reader 6).

- What are some of the events or policies he names that profoundly affected the lives of people in Vietnam?
- Where in Alexander's op-ed can we see the people of Palestine? How does she show what decades of Israeli occupation and aggression have meant for Palestinians?
- If she asked for more stories for an expanded piece, what would you suggest she add to more fully present the experiences of Palestinians? What else do you think people need to know? Or what else would you like to know? Are there things you think you need to learn more about?

On the challenges of sustaining nonviolent resistance

His steadfast commitment to nonviolent social change notwithstanding, in "Beyond Vietnam" Dr. King is candid in his understanding of those who have taken up arms in the face of oppression. He acknowledges the disconnect between his insistence that young men in the "ghettoes of the North" solve their problems without Molotov cocktails or rifles and their too-true observations that the U.S. was solving its problems with "massive doses of violence" in Vietnam (Reader 4).

Of the Viet Cong – the guerrilla force of the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam – he asks:

What do they think of our condoning the violence which led to their own taking up of arms? How can they believe in our integrity when now we speak of "aggression from the North" as if there were nothing more essential to the war? How can they trust us when now we charge them with violence after the murderous reign of Diem and charge them with violence while we pour every new weapon of death into their land? Surely we must understand their feelings, even if we do not condone their actions. Surely we must see that the men we supported pressed them to their violence. Surely we must see that our own computerized plans of destruction simply dwarf their greatest acts (Reader 8).

For her part, Alexander reminds readers of the thousands of civilians killed and wounded in repeated Israeli attacks on Gaza, as well as countless other violations of Palestinians' rights by Israeli soldiers, officials, and laws. And though she cites growing support for the nonviolent Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, Alexander notes the resistance it has faced.

- How can the passages from Dr. King's speech quoted above (and/or other parts of the speech) inform our understanding of and action against the Israeli occupation of Palestine? Can his analysis, including his observations about the asymmetry of forces, provide insights as we talk about the ways people resist and why – in Palestine and in other places around the world?
- Learn more about the case of Bahia Amawi, the Palestinian-American speech pathologist mentioned by Alexander. Amawi lost her job after refusing to sign a pledge that she would not boycott the state of Israel. Her story was one of those featured in the new documentary, [Boycott](#), from director Julia Bacha and [Just Vision](#), an independent media organization based in Israel-Palestine.

- If you live in the U.S., find out about the status of anti-boycott legislation in your state. Palestine Legal tracks these laws [here](#).

On the United States' place in the world

Quoting Buddhist leaders in Vietnam, Dr. King reminds us of one of the war's costs to the United States: "Each day the war goes on the hatred increases in the heart of the Vietnamese and in the hearts of those of humanitarian instinct. The Americans are forcing even their friends into becoming their enemies. ... The image of America will never again be the image of revolution, freedom, and democracy, but the image of violence and militarism" (Reader 10). In her final lines, Alexander says, "In this new year, I aim to speak with greater courage and conviction about injustices beyond our borders, *particularly those that are funded by our government* (emphasis added), and stand in solidarity with struggles for democracy and freedom."

- What do you think is the "image of America" in Vietnam or Palestine today? What about in other countries? You can share personal or other examples.
- Does this perception matter? If so, why; if not, why not?
- What are "the injustices beyond our borders" that you are most concerned about?
- What are some of the ways that individuals can "stand in solidarity with struggles for democracy and freedom" as Alexander pledges to do?
- What would it look like for the United States to both support and reflect freedom and democracy in the world today?

On the choices before us

Towards the end of his speech, Dr. King lays out what he believes it will take for the United States to "get on the right side of the world revolution" and to conquer "the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism." He says, "we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society" (Reader 13).

- In what ways does U.S. policy towards Israel reflect or bolster the racism, materialism, and militarism that Dr. King decried? Give specific examples from past and/or ongoing U.S. policy.
- What are actions that people and movements have taken to challenge racism, materialism, and militarism since 1967? Think of examples from the U.S., from Palestine, and from other places in the world?
- What are things that individuals can continue to do today to be a part of this necessary "revolution of values"?

Concluding reflection

As Alexander points out, "[t]oday, we can only speculate about where King would stand" on the question of Palestine. While this is true, it is also true that we need not speculate about where the principal author of his April 4, 1967 speech, [Dr. Vincent Harding](#), stood on this question.

In October 2012, Dr. Harding traveled to the West Bank as [part of a delegation organized by the Dorothy Cotton Institute](#) and led by Rabbi Brian Walt, who Alexander quotes at some length in her piece. The group's primary goal was to "respond to the request from Palestinian peace activists to help increase the international visibility of the Palestinian non-violent resistance movement, particularly in the U.S., and support the efforts of Palestinians and their Israeli allies to ensure human rights, justice and democracy for all."

The month after that visit, as Israel again rained bombs on Gaza in “Operation Pillar of Defense,” Harding [recorded his reading of a letter of solidarity to Bassem Tamimi](#), one of the leaders of an ongoing nonviolent resistance campaign in the West Bank village of Nabi Saleh. Tamimi was arrested and tortured during the First Intifada and has been imprisoned by Israeli authorities many times since. He is the father of Ahed Tamimi, who in 2018, at age 17, was sentenced to eight months in prison by an Israeli military court after she slapped a soldier.

Consider the following points of reflection and discussion after listening to Harding’s letter.

- How does Dr. Harding address Tamimi? What does this tell us? Why is this important?
- Dr. Harding recalls walking with Tamimi “through the tear gas canisters and the generations-old olive trees.” Reflect on the significance of this juxtaposition. What can this image tell us about nonviolent struggle?
- Dr. Harding tells Tamimi that Americans “are more ready than ever before to hear about Palestinians who work for nonviolent alternatives to injustice, to degradation, to occupation...” and to “listen to a call to hold our country and ourselves accountable for so much of the tragedy in your land.” In what ways does this part of Dr. Harding’s letter echo the speech he wrote for Dr. King in 1967? In what ways does it depart from that speech? Since it was written well before Alexander’s op-ed, how does it foreshadow or point towards any parts of her piece?

Notes to K-12 classroom teachers

While we hope you can use many of the prompts and questions offered here to explore aspects of these important texts with your students, they may benefit from a more structured activity that is based on abridged versions of the sources. This [graphic organizer and reading guide](#) is an adaptation of the “[Comparing Two Texts](#)” strategy outlined by The New York Times’s Learning Network. Our version of the approach is broken down, reformatted, and simplified to provide more scaffolding and clarity for students. You can access our excerpted version of Dr. King’s speech [here](#) and a lightly abridged version of Michelle Alexander’s op-ed [here](#). If you can, we recommend that you use the full text of Alexander’s piece; the content and language are clear and straightforward and should be accessible for many levels of readers, provided they are given sufficient time to work through it.

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