

Martin Luther King Jr. Saw Three Evils in the World

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By Martin Luther King Jr.

Editor's Note: Read *The Atlantic's* special coverage of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy. *The Hungry Club Forum* began as a secret initiative of the Butler Street YMCA, in Atlanta. It was a place where sympathetic white politicians could meet out of the public eye with local black leaders, who were excluded from many of the city's civic organizations. King, an Atlanta native, addressed the club on May 10, 1967. He acknowledged that progress had been made in civil rights, but warned that the "evils" of racism, poverty, and the Vietnam War endangered further gains for black Americans.

Three major evils—the evil of racism, the evil of poverty, and the evil of war. These are the three things that I want to deal with today. Now let us turn first to the evil of racism. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racism is still alive all over America. Racial injustice is still the Negro's burden and America's shame. And we must face the hard fact that many Americans would like to have a nation which is a democracy for white Americans but simultaneously a dictatorship over black Americans. We must face the fact that we still have much to do in the area of race relations.

Now to be sure there has been some progress, and I would not want to overlook that. We've seen that progress a great deal here in our Southland. Probably the greatest area of this

progress has been the breakdown of legal segregation. And so the movement in the South has profoundly shaken the entire edifice of segregation. And I am convinced that segregation is as dead as a doornail in its legal sense, and the only thing uncertain about it now is how costly some of the segregationists who still linger around will make the funeral. And so there has been progress. But we must not allow this progress to cause us to engage in a superficial, dangerous optimism. The plant of freedom has grown only a bud and not yet a flower. And there is no area of our country that can boast of clean hands in the area of brotherhood. Every city confronts a serious problem. Now there are those who are trying to say now that the civil rights movement is dead. I submit to you that it is more alive today than ever before. What they fail to realize is that we are now in a transition period. We are moving into a new phase of the struggle. For well now twelve years, the struggle was basically a struggle to end legal segregation. In a sense it was a struggle for decency. It was a struggle to get rid of all of the humiliation and the syndrome of depravation surrounding the system of legal segregation. And I need not remind you that those were glorious days. We cannot forget the days of Montgomery, when fifty thousand Negroes decided that it was ultimately more honorable to walk the streets in dignity than to accept segregation within, in humiliation. We will not forget the 1960 sit-in movement, when by the thousands students decided to sit in at lunch counters, protesting humiliation and segregation. And when they decided to sit down at those counters, they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and carrying the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. We will not forget the Freedom Rides of sixty one, and the Birmingham Movement of sixty three, a movement which literally subpoenaed the conscience of a large segment of the nation to appear before the judgement seat of morality on the whole question of civil rights. We will not forget Selma, when by the thousands we marched from that city to Montgomery to dramatize the fact that Negroes did not have the right to vote. These were marvelous movements. But that period is over now. And we are moving into a new phase.

And because we are moving into this new phase, some people feel that the civil rights movement is dead. The new phase is a struggle for genuine equality. It is not merely a struggle for decency now, it is not merely a struggle to get rid of the brutality of a Bull Connor and a Jim Clark. It is now a struggle for genuine equality on all levels, and this will be a much more difficult struggle. You see, the gains in the first period, or the first era of struggle, were obtained from the power structure at bargain rates; it didn't cost the nation anything to integrate lunch counters. It didn't cost the nation anything to integrate hotels and motels. It didn't cost the nation a penny to guarantee the right to vote. Now we are in a period where it will cost the nation billions of dollars to get rid of poverty, to get rid of slums, to make quality integrated education a reality. This is where we are now. Now we're going to lose some friends in this period. The allies who were with us in Selma will not all stay with us during this period. We've got to understand what is happening. Now they often call this the white

backlash ... It's just a new name for an old phenomenon. The fact is that there has never been any single, solid, determined commitment on the part of the vast majority of white Americans to genuine equality for Negroes. There has always been ambivalence ... In 1863 the Negro was granted freedom from physical slavery through the Emancipation Proclamation. But he was not given land to make that freedom meaningful. At the same time, our government was giving away millions of acres of land in the Midwest and the West, which meant that the nation was willing to undergird its white peasants from Europe with an economic floor, while refusing to do it for its black peasants from Africa who were held in slavery two hundred and forty four years. And this is why Frederick Douglass would say that emancipation for the Negro was freedom to hunger, freedom to the winds and rains of heaven, freedom without roofs to cover their heads. It was freedom without bread to eat, without land to cultivate. It was freedom and famine at the same time. And it is a miracle that the Negro has survived.

In 1875 the nation passed a civil rights bill, and refused to enforce it. In 1964, the nation passed a weaker civil rights bill and even to this day has failed to enforce it in all of its dimensions. In 1954 the Supreme Court rendered a decision outlawing segregation in the public schools. And even to this day in the deep South, less than five per cent of the Negro students are attending integrated schools. We haven't even made one per cent progress a year. If it continues at this rate, it will take another ninety seven years to integrate the schools of the South and of our nation ...

Now let us be sure that we will have to keep the pressure alive. We've never made any gain in civil rights without constant, persistent, legal and non-violent pressure. Don't let anybody make you feel that the problem will work itself out ...

The second evil that I want to deal with is the evil of poverty. Like a monstrous octopus it spreads its nagging prehensile tentacles into cities and hamlets and villages all over our nation. Some forty million of our brothers and sisters are poverty stricken, unable to gain the basic necessities of life. And so often we allow them to become invisible because our society's so affluent that we don't see the poor. Some of them are Mexican Americans. Some of them are Indians. Some are Puerto Ricans. Some are Appalachian whites. The vast majority are Negroes in proportion to their size in the population ... Now there is nothing new about poverty. It's been with us for years and centuries. What is new at this point though, is that we now have the resources, we now have the skills, we now have the techniques to get rid of poverty. And the question is whether our nation has the will ...

Now I want to deal with the third evil that constitutes the dilemma of our nation and the world. And that is the evil of war. Somehow these three evils are tied together. The triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism. The great problem and the great challenge facing mankind today is to get rid of war ... We have left ourselves as a nation morally and politically isolated in the world. We have greatly strengthened the forces of

reaction in America, and excited violence and hatred among our own people. We have diverted attention from civil rights. During a period of war, when a nation becomes obsessed with the guns of war, social programs inevitably suffer. People become insensitive to pain and agony in their own midst ...

Now I know that there are people who are confused about the war and they say to me and anybody who speaks out against it, "You shouldn't be speaking out. You're a civil rights leader, and the two issues should not be joined together." Well ... the two issues are tied together. And I'm going to keep them together. Oh my friends, it's good for us to fight for integrated lunch counters, and for integrated schools. And I'm going to continue to do that. But wouldn't it be absurd to be talking about integrated schools without being concerned about the survival of a world in which to be integrated ...

For those who are telling me to keep my mouth shut, I can't do that. I'm against segregation at lunch counters, and I'm not going to segregate my moral concerns. And we must know on some positions, cowardice asks the question, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question, "Is it politic?" Vanity asks the question, "Is it popular?" But conscience asks the question, "Is it right?" And there're times when you must take a stand that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but you must do it because it is right.

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