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Martin Luther King, The American Dream and Vietnam: A Collision of Rhetorical Trajectories

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This essay explores the rhetorical complexity of Martin Luther King's dual role as political and moral leader, particularly during his last years when he was attacked for his opposition to the Vietnam War. By: 1) discussing and developing the theoretical value and critical possibilities associated with the term "rhetorical trajectories," 2) tracing the trajectories present in King's rhetoric in order to set the context for a speech he gave in 1967 at Riverside Church, and 3) analyzing the text of that speech, the essay offers insight into King's rhetorical impact, and, as a result, into the possibilities and limitations for combining pragmatic and moralistic discourse in American society.

IN MEMORIALIZING MARTIN LUTHER KING, we have fixed in memory the triumphant civil rights leader of the early 1960s who appealed to the conscience of the nation and summoned his fellow Americans to realize the dream he so eloquently described at the March on Washington. Such a vision supports the popular view of King as a great moralist. In fact, King was a unique combination of both moralist and pragmatist, able to bring a sense of impeccable timing to his persuasion and to create situations to which Americans had to react by passing judgment on themselves (Halberstam, 1983). David Halberstam points to this unique combination of moralist/pragmatist in eulogizing King: "It was his great victory to strip segregation of its moral legitimacy and in so doing, in a society like ours, to prepare it for its legal collapse as well. That he

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did this without holding office and in a way that a vast majority of white middle-class Americans did not consider threatening is a sign of immense skill as a moralist-activist" (p. 306). Halberstam (1983) further defines King's "immense skill" as a combination of invention and good audience analysis:

He did not do this as others had . . . Instead he offered reporters two absolutely irresistible things: ongoing confrontations of a high order and almost letter-perfect villains. In that sense he was more than just a master manipulator; he was, in the television age, as great a dramatist of mid-century America as Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams. He cast his epics very well; impoverished blacks would wear white hats and white police officers would wear black ones. In effect he took the terrible beast of segregation, which had always been there just beneath the surface, and made it visible. It was not so much that he slew the beast, but that instead, he brought it to the surface, and the beast, forced to reveal its police dogs and cattle prods and water hoses, exposed, died on its own (p. 311).

King himself gives indication of the moral and pragmatic aspects of his character. In addressing questions about non-violence as a method of action and the calls for violence from factions within the African-American community, he replied: "I think to turn to violence on the part of the Negro at this time would be both impractical and immoral. . . . I think we must still stand on the premise of nonviolence and I choose to do that not only because I think it is morally right, but I think it is practically sound" (qtd. in Washington, 1986, pp. 390-391).

Up to now, criticism of King's speeches, actions, and life has tended to focus on the moral aspects of his character and rhetoric. Such criticism can be divided into two basic types: (1) evaluation of King on the basis of the moral correctness of his vision, the extent of the change he was able to bring about and the eloquence of his style (Bowen, 1966; Branch, 1988; Fulkerson, 1979; Smith, 1968; Snow, 1985); and (2) re-evaluation of King's impact based on discrepancies and less than high moral conduct in King's personal life and academic work (Abernathy, 1989; Ostling, Ludtke, & Witteman, 1990; Turque, Joseph, & Rogers, 1990; Waldman, 1990). While informative, neither type of criticism reveals the rhetorical complexity involved in King's successes and "failures." In particular, such efforts do not address the complex situation of King's last years when he encountered the intractable northern ghetto, seemed ineffectual to younger blacks, and was attacked for his opposition to the Vietnam war. We are, thus, left with an incomplete understanding not only of King and his rhetorical impact but also of the continued fragmentation of the African-American community along polarized lines of assimilation versus a radical restructuring of society; a tension reflected in the widening gap between the attitudes of the black middle class and the urban poor (Bernstein, 1988, p. D1).

This essay offers additional insight into these areas through an examination of King's rhetoric in opposition to the war in Vietnam. On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before he died, King delivered a major address, "A Time to Break Silence," at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam, held at Riverside Church in New York. This

speech deserves attention because the speech itself, as well as the responses to it, reveal the extent to which King was propelled by the demands of pragmatism and moralism, assimilation and radicalization.

While King had spoken in opposition to the war prior to "A Time to Break Silence,"¹ the address followed a time of self-imposed silence concerning the war during which advisers, other civil rights activists, and representatives of the Johnson administration all tried to put pressure on King to avoid public opposition to the war and linking the civil rights and anti-war movements (Garrow, 1986, pp. 438-439, 444-445; Miller, 1968, p. 232). In the Riverside Church speech, King denounced the Johnson Administration's policy in Vietnam, defended his authority as a civil rights leader to speak out on the war, and argued that his civil rights and antiwar stances were inexorably interrelated and codependent strands of a basic moral integrity. The speech was highly controversial at the time: it occasioned extensive debate in Congress and in the public press, both as to the merits of its argument and as to the propriety of its topic. Yet, read from today's perspective, we are inclined to accept King's arguments, the morality of his stance, his right to speak out against the war and the connections between his stance on civil rights and his objection to the war.

As a result, this essay will address the following questions: What are the constraints and limitations of moral discourse in the context of a social movement? Can a moral vision be achieved in practice, or is a rhetor impelled by the trajectory of the moral imperative, at some point, either to reject practical solutions or to settle for conserving current institutions? We will attempt to answer these questions by 1) discussing and developing the theoretical value and possibilities associated with the term "rhetorical trajectories," 2) tracing the trajectories present in the rhetoric of Martin Luther King in order to set the context for the Riverside Church speech, and 3) analyzing the text itself.

Our thesis is that Martin Luther King was placed in a role that required dual communication: he had to supply a practical, unifying vision (in other words, become a political leader) for those included in, as well as those excluded from, mainstream American life, and simultaneously, he had to evoke and maintain the transcendent image of moralist. Each of these demands placed King on a rhetorical trajectory. The dual trajectories that emerged propelled King towards a collision course: a vision which initially encompassed both needs but eventually led to a radical critique of American society and policy. While the moral and pragmatic strands of King's discourse were critical in placing his demands for racial justice within the confines of the American Dream, the war in Vietnam presented a basic challenge to King and to the American Dream, causing King and certain members of his audience to question the premise that America was basically good and just and that all citizens could participate equally in its promise. Analysis of the trajectories and the rhetoric that emerged provides not only a more

complete understanding and evaluation of King's discourse but also provides a case study of the rhetorical potential and limitations of combining pragmatic and moralistic discourse in American society.

RHETORICAL TRAJECTORIES

In a 1984 article, Leland Griffin used the term "rhetorical trajectory" to describe the progression or curve of development that a speaker establishes as he or she attempts to turn a vision into reality. Griffin suggests that by tracing the "terminological trajectories in the rhetoric of an individual or a collectivity we may gain understanding as to how 'a particular state of readiness is achieved'" (1984, p. 128). Griffin analyzes the sequence of god and devil terms in Lee Harvey Oswald's discourse, and argues that this sequence placed him in a state of mind "'which another state of mind . . . [could] appropriately follow'" (p. 126). In Oswald's case, the state of mind that "appropriately followed" allegedly led to the assassination of President Kennedy. If, as Griffin suggests, the power of one's rhetoric is such that it "maketh the man [or woman]" (in other words, that rhetoric designed to move others is just as effective in moving ourselves), "trajectory" provides a strong imagistic and analytic metaphor for investigating symbolic influence. To develop further the implications of the concept, we turn first to its theoretical roots.

Griffin points to Burke's notion of "qualitative progression" described in *Counter-Statement* as a progression that "by the presence of one quality, prepares us for the introduction of another" (1969, pp. 124-125). Qualitative progression is differentiated from syllogistic progression because the former lacks a pronounced or formal anticipatory nature: "We are prepared less to demand a certain qualitative progression than to recognize its rightness after the event" (1969, p. 125). Thus the cycle of a storm, the gradations of a sunrise, the ripening of crops are all instances in which we find "the material of progressive form" (1969, p. 141).

Some see such a pattern of meaning in the life and death of King whose prophetic discourse prepared them to see his martyrdom as appropriate, albeit horrible (comparisons with apostles and prophets who were martyred for preaching God's "truth" are recalled). It is *this* kind of response—that is, a feeling as to the rightness or destiny of a progression of events or words—which qualitative progression evokes.

Linked to the idea of qualitative progression are two other Burkean terms: "capacity" and "pattern of experience." A capacity is an ability to function in a certain way and one's ability to do so implies gratification in so functioning. Thus a capacity, according to Burke (1969) "is not something which lies dormant until used—a capacity is a command to act in a certain way" (p. 142). In a similar vein, there are "patterns of experience" which "distinguish us as characters." Patterns of experience are formed when specific environmental conditions call forth

and stress certain "universal experiences as being more relevant" than others. Thus, "The protest of a Byron, the passive resistance of a Gandhi, the hopefulness of a Browning, the satirical torment of a Swift, the primness of a Jane Austen—these are all patterns of experience" (Burke, 1969, p. 151). The important aspect of such a pattern of experience is that it is a creative force. A pattern arises as "a method of adjustment to one condition" but soon becomes a method of meeting other conditions, and, as a result, "tends to make over the world in its own image" (Burke, 1969, p. 152).

The combination of these three concepts—"qualitative progressions," "capacity," and "patterns of experience"—coupled with Griffin's use and description of the term rhetorical trajectory, provide the basis for the following summary of critical characteristics. First, as Griffin suggested, a trajectory refers to a rhetorical arc of development upon which a speaker embarks. Such a concept can be critically applied to rhetorical discourse at the level of the social/political movement. One's capacities and patterns of experience work together to bring about development in one direction rather than another, to ensure emphasis of certain ideas and visions rather than others. When these predispositions are thrust into a larger context and the individual becomes a leader, the predispositions are incorporated into the larger curve of development, not in the form of a syllogistic kind of logic but rather, in the form of poetic congruence: the feeling of "rightness" discussed earlier as a sign of qualitative progression. This "rightness" or poetic congruence can be articulated in a number of ways, for example: being a consistent dramatic character before the public audience or maintaining a certain tradition of the self so that one's life "makes sense" to oneself and others. For King, "capacity" and "patterns of experience" led to his drawing a particular moral trajectory *and* a pragmatic trajectory with an inclusive vision of the American Dream that became part and parcel of ongoing audience expectations.

The "poetic congruence" associated with qualitative progression also gives rise to a second characteristic which is simply that such a curve of development is made evident by projecting forward the implications of the speaker's terms and symbols in order to discover how a particular state of mind is achieved. In this sense, the concept of rhetorical trajectory points our attention to the way in which rhetoric designed to move others *also* works to propel the rhetor along a certain course of symbolic action. According to this view, then, the context of a particular speech is heavily influenced by the progression of a speaker's rhetoric. Critically tracing the strands that compose such a progression provides an understanding of the constraints as well as the possibilities for rhetorical invention which, in turn, shape and reflect a speaker's choices and motives.

The third characteristic extends further the critical implications of the term. In directing attention to choices and motives as both products

and producers of patterns of experience at the individual level and rhetorical progressions at the social movement level, the notion of trajectories can be an effective critical construct for undertaking an analysis of a speaker's universe of discourse and of the limitations and constraints of certain types of discourse in a societal context. In other words, the critic attempts to discover not only the role of rhetoric in bringing about certain symbolic events but also attempts to determine the limits of rhetorical integration and the kinds of factors that combine to bring about or enforce such limits. In the case of King, the question the method raises is, at what point and to what extent can a speaker—as a representative of an oppressed group—offer a radical critique and bring about a shift in the American vision (dream)? With this question in mind, we turn to an exploration of terms and symbols in the rhetoric of Martin Luther King.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

In the context of the African-American experience, the concept of "dual communication" refers to a kind of communication in which a speaker sends one message to the "white man" and another to "the brothers" (Smith, 1972). W. E. B. Du Bois, more than half a century earlier described the duality of the African-American experience and the exigence that evokes a dual communication strategy: "One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (qtd. in Branch, 1988, pp. 72-73). Certainly, as Taylor Branch points out, this "paradox of identity" characterized Martin Luther King's experience as well. It is not surprising, then, that as a speaker for the civil rights movement, King established a rhetorical progression marked by dual trajectories. The first was a moral trajectory marked by oppositional god and devil terms such as justice and injustice, freedom and oppression, and morality and immorality. The second was a pragmatic trajectory marked, ironically, by the term "dream," and developed as a vision that would be achieved by pragmatic acts leading to inclusion in the benefits of a good society for those who had been left out. During the 1950s and the early 1960s, these trajectories were convergent since King offered jeremiads that located the enemy of the civil rights movement in unfulfilled fundamental values, not in individuals and certainly not in the American political system.

In 1956, for example, King characterized the movement in the following manner: "There are those who would try to make of this a hate campaign. This is not a war between the white and the Negro but a conflict between justice and injustice" (qtd. in Garrow, 1986, p. 66). King's paired terms—justice/injustice, freedom/oppression, freedom/exploitation—highlighted the values that were in conflict and emphasized that the enemy was not the system itself. Concerning the Montgomery boycott, he said, "It is bigger than Montgomery . . . The vast majority of the people of the world are colored . . . Today many are free . . . And the rest

are on the road. . . We are a part of that great movement. . . We must oppose all exploitation. . . We want to see everybody free" (qtd. in Garrow, 1986, p. 71).

Thus, at this stage, King linked his appeals to overcome oppression with the deeply rooted American belief in a nation based on freedom, justice and morality. In so doing, King was, as James Melvin Washington (1988) puts it, "firmly in the mainstream" of an American dissenting tradition that included abolitionists and "many other varieties of progressive reformers" who have helped to shape institutions by summoning our society to fulfill its most fundamental values (p. xi). Those values are uncontested; what is at issue is our failure to live up to them. In selecting these terms, then, King established the movement as a revolt *within* the democratic system rather than *against* it. As Murphy (1990) argues, this is exactly the kind of movement the jeremiad works to produce: "The form of the jeremiad directs what might otherwise be a search for social and political alternatives into a celebration of the values of the culture and of change within the status quo" (p. 404; Bercovitch, 1978; Johannesen, 1985; Ritter, 1980).

In the beginning, the movement's goal was to achieve full citizenship rights for blacks. As a result, King's was a rhetoric of inclusion in two senses: it sought the inclusion of blacks in American society, and the inclusion of whites and blacks in the same universe of discourse. To accomplish this dual goal, King used broad rhetorical appeals. Most prevalent were appeals to end world oppression and appeals to fulfill the American Dream. The former was a moral stance, and the latter pragmatic. In his moral appeals, King redefined the problem of race relations as that of human beings exploiting other human beings rather than whites dominating blacks. In addition, the adoption of nonviolence as the method to expose and relieve oppression generated appeals for peace and helped to legitimize both the movement and Dr. King—an observation confirmed by his receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize. King was able to demonstrate that "the cancer of racial bigotry had infested America's cherished democratic and moral tradition" (Washington, 1986, p. xi). The tradition, a good in itself, would be reclaimed and justified by removing all vestiges of the racism that had "infested" it. Oppression would be overcome and inclusion achieved, all at the same time.

Appeals for inclusion through pragmatic acts were embodied in the metaphor of the American Dream. This was powerful, especially as King explicated how the dream could be fulfilled. The metaphor appeared in King's major addresses as early as 1961. In a speech entitled, "If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins," King described

a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men will not argue that the color a man's skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a nation where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality (qtd. in Washington, 1986, pp. 206-207).

In a speech entitled, "The American Dream," delivered at Lincoln University on June 6, 1961, King tied the dream more directly to the Declaration of Independence noting, "The American dream reminds us that every man is heir to the legacy of worthiness" (qtd. in Washington, 1986, p. 208). And on August 28, 1963, the "Dream" resounded as a rhetorical reality for a brief moment in the Washington sunshine as King conjured an image of blacks and whites, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, joining together singing, "Free at last."

During 1964 the dream metaphor continued to figure prominently in King's major speeches, but by the end of 1965, the leader who had described the Negro revolution as seeking an end to oppression through integration into American society began to call instead for "a radical reordering of national priorities" (Garrow, 1986, p. 549). In questioning the values of American society—rather than urging more stringent adherence to them—King rejected the jeremiad and, thus, the traditional form of American dissent. The rhetorical trajectories of the American Dream and the call to end oppression were no longer convergent.

Difficulties emerged as King became more active in the north. One of his great strengths had been his ability to expose the sources of oppression and injustice in the lights of the television cameras, but in the North these sources were invisible, complex political and economic forces. King began to challenge the fundamental precepts of American society. As he told David Halberstam, "For years I labored with the idea of reforming existing institutions of the society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values and perhaps the nationalization of some major industries" (qtd. in Garrow, 1986, p. 549).

In challenging the basis of American society, King spoke at cross purposes with his earlier struggle for inclusion in the "American Dream." Propelled by the vision of an end to oppression and disillusioned by economic and political realities, he sought increasingly to redefine the "Dream" and thereby make the trajectories convergent once more: "Let us . . . not think of our movement as one that seeks to integrate the Negro into all the existing values of American society." Rather, what was now required was a "radical restructuring of the architecture of American society" (qtd. in Garrow, 1986, p. 567).

Practically, according to King, this goal required measures to create or redistribute economic opportunity, and for a time it seemed as though the programs of the Great Society promised movement towards this kind of social transformation. Increasingly, however, the cost of the Vietnam War thwarted the expansion of these programs beyond the pilot stage, and the Johnson administration was charged with virtual abandonment of the war on poverty. King began to identify Vietnam as the major obstacle to funding for social welfare programs. In addition, he continued his rhetoric against oppression, claiming that

"America had to realize that international violence was just as immoral for humanity as racial segregation" (qtd. in Garrow, 1986, p. 551).

When King decided to address the problems of the ghettos, perhaps, as Halberstam has suggested, the rhetorical transition from prophet in the American tradition of the jeremiad to the alienated radical visionary was a necessary measure of audience adaptation. Describing the voice of those in the ghettos as "harsh and alienated," Halberstam (1967) claimed that, "If King is to speak for them truly, then his voice must reflect theirs, it too must be alienated, and it is likely to be increasingly at odds with the rest of American society" (p. 46). But Halberstam (1967) also noted the extent to which the moral vision King rhetorically created had come to be creative in and of itself: "He has finally come to believe his myth, just as the people in the Pentagon believe theirs and the man in the White House believes his; he sticks to the morality of his life and of his decisions, until there becomes something of a mystic quality to him" (p. 48).

Certainly, King's moral vision had grown; it was becoming increasingly clear that his compassion for humanity would not be contained to calls for justice on a single front. Once he had determined that it was "time to break silence" on the Vietnam war, it should, perhaps, have been no surprise that he proceeded forthrightly. However, the rhetorical strength of the American Dream trajectory with its appeals for inclusion into a "basically good" American society remained extremely powerful. On April 4, 1967, the speech at Riverside Church brought together a man and an issue. King was propelled by a widening moral imperative that would now include the geopolitical complexities of the Vietnam War. Simultaneously and precariously, American tradition required support from citizens (those included in its "good society") in time of war. It was to be a volatile combination.

"A TIME TO BREAK SILENCE"

The Riverside Church speech is marked by three thematic movements. First, King established the necessity of protest against the war and identified himself as a speaker on behalf of those most affected by it. Second, he developed a history of the war as seen from the view of the ordinary Vietnamese peasant. Finally, he mounted a plea for a revolution in values intended to aid all Americans in seeing what he saw: the great folly of American policy in Vietnam.

The Necessity of Protest

King (1967) began by establishing that his dissent was reluctant. As he said, "Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war" (p. 103). His dissent, however, was impelled by "the mandates of conscience and the reading of history." He then listed seven

major reasons for his opposition to the war: 1) it distracted the nation from civil rights and poverty, 2) blacks were dying in disproportionate numbers, 3) it made a mockery of calls for nonviolence, 4) it destroyed the soul, 5) his dissent was required by the mission he assumed in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, 6) it was also required by his status as a man of God, and 7) he would prefer to focus on the needs of the poor.

The war itself was evil, "eviscerating" all for which King had worked. It was particularly vicious because it preyed upon the poor, both as combatants and as victims of broken promises on the domestic front. The civil rights goals for which he had fought and to which he dedicated his life could not be achieved so long as the war in Vietnam intervened. Moreover, King reasoned, a minister must not narrow allegiance, but rather must work on behalf of all God's people, including the outcasts and the defenseless, who presumably have a preferred stake in God's transcendent plan. King's credibility in adopting this stance is sustained further by his having received the Nobel Prize. In this case, however, the defenseless were the Vietnamese themselves.

The Vietnamese Perspective

In the second section of the Riverside Church speech, King offered an historical "peasant's eye view" of American intervention in Southeast Asia. In offering a history "from below," King tried to convince his audience that the American presence was viewed by many in both North and South Vietnam as yet another visit from "strange liberators" (pp. 107-109).

Even as Ho Chi Minh quoted the American Declaration of Independence, American officials threw in their lot with the French, practicing a "deadly Western arrogance" and rejecting "a revolutionary government seeking self-determination" that was created by "clearly indigenous forces" rather than any outside Communist power. "For nine years, the United States continued its support of the French, ultimately absorbing over 80 percent of the cost of the war" (pp. 107-108). Moreover, the United States, by supporting the dictator Ngo Dinh Diem, subverted the Geneva agreements to reunify Vietnam. After Diem, America continued to back corrupt rulers who lacked popular support, even while promising peace, democracy, and land reform. In the process, we destroyed the two most precious institutions of the Vietnamese peasant, the family and the village.

King also offered a history from the perspective of the "enemies" in the North. "Surely," he reasoned, "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 violence" (p. 109). The American government was guilty of deception and arrogance in calling for national elections in which the people of the North could neither plan nor participate.

The true meaning of compassion, King maintained, was that "it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves" (p. 110). The long struggle against the Japanese and the French, the numerous betrayals in the negotiations with these invaders, had shaped the perspective of the North Vietnamese. Not surprisingly, then, America was met by a "a deep but understandable mistrust" when it speaks of aggression "as it drops thousands of bombs on a poor weak nation more than eight thousand miles from its shores" (p. 111).

In the Riverside Church address, therefore, King attempts to "give a voice to the voiceless in Vietnam" and to "understand the arguments of those who are called the enemy." If the word "Negro" were substituted for "North Vietnamese" and some of the reference points changed, King might have similarly given voice to the voiceless blacks in the northern ghettos. The analogy demonstrates the extent to which King was moving away from appeals for inclusion to appeals for radical restructuring. In Vietnam (as in our own domestic policies and social structure?), America was "on the side of the wealthy and secure while we create a hell for the poor"; if this situation did not change, the "image of America would never again be the image of revolution, freedom and democracy, but the image of violence and militarism" (p. 111).

The Moral Revolution

One major consequence of King's account of the war is that the United States is depicted as morally culpable. A solution to the current plight, therefore, requires an act of expiation. In the third section of the speech, King proposed that if we in America were to "atone for our sins" we would have to "take the initiative in bringing a halt to this tragic war" (p. 112). He demanded an end to all bombing, a unilateral ceasefire, immediate steps to prevent the war from spreading elsewhere in Southeast Asia, recognition that the National Liberation Front had a role to play in any future Vietnamese government, and a set date by which all foreign troops would be withdrawn from Vietnam in accordance with the 1954 Geneva agreement. To persuade the American government to adopt these goals, he called for direct action, saying, "We must be prepared to match actions with words by seeking out every creative means of protest possible," even including draft resistance (p. 113).

King also used the war for a more profound appeal—the call to a more humanistic orientation requiring a fundamental rethinking of values. Here Vietnam became a symbol of the corruption of American ideals. King demanded a "shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a person-oriented society." The rationale cut to the core of King's growing distrust of American society: "When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable

of being conquered" (p. 114). Drawing upon Biblical allusions to the good Samaritan and the Jericho road, he lamented the injustices of unchecked capitalism and its rapacious capacity to siphon the wealth of Asia, Africa, and Latin America as speaking to the need for a true revolution of values in which the United States had a major responsibility and to which it should conform. King's new global vision undercut his own previous trajectory, which had been marked by calls for inclusion into a "basically good" American society, and violated audience expectations on a variety of levels.

King transformed the war into a representative anecdote for "western arrogance." He cast America into the role of a greedy reactionary preying upon the poor and oppressed while at the same time squandering its own talent and treasure in pursuit of an unjust war. He presented the escalation of the war and the neglect of the poor as the sad anthem to a dream diminished into a frightening national nightmare of scorn for human life and human values. In following the trajectory of the moral imperative and abandoning the trajectory of inclusion, King raised an insistent cry, once heard only at extreme radical fringes of the political culture. As the following discussion reveals, King's prophetic voice seemed to overcome his pragmatism. But the fact that some people then, and many Americans today, recognize the speech's "rightness" gives credence to the poetic congruence of the speech with the trajectory of opposing oppression as well as, paradoxically, its pragmatic failings.

A COLLISION OF TRAJECTORIES

Immediate reactions to the Riverside Church speech were generally negative. Most centered on King's disregard for the legacy of the American Dream. A *Washington Post* editorial characterized the speech as "not a sober and responsible comment on the war" but rather "a reflection of [King's] disappointment at the slow progress of civil rights and the war on poverty . . . filled with bitter and damaging allegations." The *Post* noted further that it was a "strange irony indeed that the Government which has labored the hardest to right these ancient wrongs is the object of the most savage denunciation, the most undeserved criticism, and the most unfair blame" ("A Tragedy," 1967, p. A20).

Similar themes can be found throughout the mainstream press. In an article in the *Washington Evening Star*, Carl Rowan decried King's transformation from "the Montgomery boycott leader with an uncanny knack for saying the right things" into a person "who has very little sense of, or concern for, public relations and no tactical skill." Rowan found it a mystery that King would burden "the clearcut moral issue of racial equality with the bitterly complicated controversy over war in Vietnam" (1967). (This last comment is ironic in light of the fact that, only a few short years earlier, it was *civil rights* that had been referred to as a complex, complicated issue). The *New York Times* likewise

observed that the speech was an attempted "fusing of two public problems that are distinct and separate. By driving them together Dr. King has done a disservice to both" ("Dr. King's Error," 1967, p. A36). *Life* magazine called the speech "a demagogic slander" in which King went "beyond his personal right to dissent" in connecting "progress in civil rights here with a proposal that amounts to abject surrender in Vietnam." In so doing, the editorial accuses, "King comes close to betraying the cause for which he has worked so long" (Dr. King's Disservice," 1967, p. 4).

These reactions identify a category problem that made King's antiwar advocacy seem inappropriate on its face. In 1967, civil rights and Vietnam were seen as two distinct issues, and—so common belief held—expertise in one did not qualify a person to speak to the other. Moreover, many of the same people who supported the civil rights legislation also supported the Johnson Administration's policy on the war. To participate in and benefit from advances made in civil rights, and then to denounce the foreign policy of those who had championed the cause of civil rights, evoked not only cognitive dissonance but accusations of ingratitude. How could one who had struggled for inclusion and integration into American society now attack the basic structure of, as one Senator put it, "the greatest system of government ever devised by the human mind"? The dissonance between the trajectories was too great to bear. Since the civil rights value of inclusion had become generally accepted, in large part because of King's earlier rhetorical success, dissonance was resolved by denouncing King's view on the war.

Negative reaction, however, was not confined to the mainstream press. Those within the civil rights movement also had trepidations about King's public antiwar stance. Whitney Young, Jr., director of the National Urban League, and Ralph Bunche, the United Nations undersecretary and a director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, both felt that King's efforts were misdirected. Young maintained that the civil rights and peace movements had "different goals" and that it was inappropriate to merge them ("N.A.A.C.P. Decries," 1967, p. 17). Bunche stated simply that "the two efforts have too little in common" and that King was making "a serious tactical error" (Sibley, 1967, p. A1). The NAACP Board of Directors passed a resolution against what it saw as an attempt to merge the civil rights and antiwar movements ("N.A.A.C.P. Decries," 1967, p. 17). Even though King denied that he favored any such merger, the uneasiness continued.

According to Garrow (1981), "the Johnson White House was extremely pleased at the negative press reaction" leveled at King. This hostile response, however, did not preclude Johnson from spearheading a plan of "increasing hostility from the [FBI] and the entire Executive Branch" (pp. 180-181). The extent of Johnson's displeasure is suggested in reports that he "had listened with relish" to FBI tapes which documented King's sexual peccadilloes and had directed the "salacious"

reports to be distributed to all liberals (Unger & Unger, 1988, p. 177). The wiretaps had been sanctioned by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who was convinced King was a Communist.

The few positive responses to the speech pointed to the underlying consistency between King's stance on Vietnam and his stance, not on inclusion in the American Dream, but on oppression, justice, and morality—the other rhetorical trajectory. These commentators portrayed the speech as the product of a moral imperative and therefore as a moral victory. An editorial in *Nation* defended King's decisions to speak out against Vietnam "because he could not play fast and loose with the moral issues. . . . He could not urge his people to practice nonviolence in the streets of American cities and condone violence in the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam" ("With But One Voice," 1967, p. 515). Likewise, California Representative Edwards, in his remarks to the House on May 2, highlighted King's consistency: "anyone who knows the total philosophical and religious view of Martin Luther King knows that he could take no other action than to speak out against the role of the U.S. in Vietnam" ("Dr. Martin Luther King on Vietnam," 1967, p. 11402). A *Detroit Free Press* editorial compared King's proposals with the terms of the Geneva accord ("Dr. King Strengthens," 1967), and *Christian Century* praised King for the stress he placed on the "obvious inseparability of wasteful war in Vietnam and postponed poverty programs in the United States" ("King Speaks for Peace," 1967, p. 492).

The basic appeals in King's Riverside Church speech are not unlike those of his earlier civil rights messages which also were grounded in appeals to justice, morality, and the end of oppression. But the *rhetorical situations* were quite different. "I Have a Dream" was delivered after seven years of protest activity during which a broad consensus had developed, at least outside the South, that segregation was wrong. That problem had been presented by King as a blemish on what was basically a good society from which the unfortunate had been excluded and in whose dream they wished to share. By contrast, at the time the speech at Riverside Church was delivered there was no similar broad consensus concerning Vietnam, and there was certainly no concerted public voice calling for radical change in societal structures.²

In addition, King's prior broad approval of the American dream established a rhetorical progression of inclusion. Based on the reaffirming myths of the society, it drew whites and blacks into the same rhetorical universe, working towards the same "Dream." While appeals grounded in moral principle provided an underlying rhetorical consistency between King's advocacy for civil rights and against the Vietnam war, they could not counteract the powerful implications of the rhetorical trajectory propelled by King's inclusive vision of the "American Dream." King's belief in the method of nonviolence, his stance against global oppression, his concern with justice and morality, led inexorably to his opposition against a war that came to epitomize the opposite. But

allegiance to the "American Dream" required the belief that American society was basically good. Audiences had come to believe in this trajectory, and for King, it was a metaphor to advance movement aims through pragmatic acts. King's speech at Riverside Church directly and publicly violated the tenet that the United States was on the moral high ground.

CONCLUSIONS

Although King's Riverside Church speech violated the values of much of its contemporary audience and seemed out of sync with King's appeals for inclusion into American society, it is overly simplistic to label it a rhetorical failure. Such an evaluation obscures the fact that there are limits to rhetorical integration and that rhetorical impact is possible—and can, at times, be more enduring—without such integration.

Our analysis indicates that while moral and pragmatic visions may at times converge, ultimately, one or both of the following will occur: the moral and pragmatic visions collide leading to rhetorical fragmentation and/or the moral vision is co-opted by the pragmatic. In the case of King's Riverside Church speech, both results were eventually obtained. This is illustrated by the fact that we recognize the "rightness" of King's rhetoric based on a now-broad consensus that Vietnam was a moral and practical mistake and we ignore or de-emphasize the radical implications of his argument. It appears then that a moral vision can be rhetorically successful in American society only to the extent that it is convergent with a pragmatic translation of that vision in keeping with traditional American values³—in other words, is eventually co-opted or subsumed by the pragmatic.

Paradoxically, however, had King taken a position consistent with his pragmatic trajectory—distinguishing, for instance, between the American dream and the current government and establishing that the Johnson Administration had somehow abandoned the dream—his rhetorical legacy would, most likely, be diminished. Pragmatic rhetoric localizes and temporalizes visions; it ties the speaker and his or her rhetoric to a particular time and place. In this case, the American Dream had become associated with specific, concrete programs that sought to bring about the inclusion of blacks in mainstream American society. It had come to stand for assimilation rather than for a creative vision of what American society could and should be. While continuing to embrace a pragmatic approach may have enabled a larger number of his contemporary audience to see King as a consistent dramatic character, it would have contradicted his tradition of self which had come to include an expanded moral vision; a vision which continues to have power today. Instead, propelled by the moral trajectory, King moved beyond the jeremiadic call to repent and return to established social values and became a radical. He called for a re-ordering of societal priorities based

on the belief that the Vietnam War was not a mistake but rather an example of an evil system working as intended.

On a broader scale, the paradox described above is similar to the situation a social movement faces when it achieves its pragmatic goals, as the civil rights movement had, only to find the impossibility of reaching its ultimate vision starkly revealed. Once this startling fact is realized, the movement's membership may come to see radical action as the only middle ground between assimilation into a culture on *its* terms and political exclusion. The lack of rhetorical integration and the rhetorical fragmentation that result from the collision of pragmatic and rhetorical trajectories in King's speech at Riverside Church enable us to characterize him as a "radical-within" the American tradition of dissent: we pick and choose from among the fragments emphasizing those that are consistent with American values and ignoring the rest. At the time, however, King was the radical thrust without by a perfecting rhetorical progression, the vision of which has yet to be realized.

ENDNOTES

1. King was "already on record" as an opponent of the war in Vietnam, but did "not emerge as a prominent antiwar figure" until February, 1967, when "in Los Angeles he called upon the country's 'creative dissenters' to 'combine the fervor of the civil rights movement with the peace movement...until the very foundations of our nation are shaken.'" In March, King and Dr. Spock "led a Holy Saturday procession of 8,500 people down State Street to the Chicago Coliseum, where King again condemned the war; but his most memorable antiwar challenge was delivered at a CALC-sponsored meeting in New York's Riverside Church on 4 April [1967]" (DeBenedetti, C. & Chatfield, C., 1990, p. 172).

2. Polling data indicate that opposition to the war rose steadily between 1964 and 1973. Although the peace movement was large and active in 1967, we have found no evidence to suggest that there was anything like a broad based consensus against the war by the Spring of 1967. In fact, DeBenedetti (1987) quotes Harris polling data in the May 14, 1967 *Washington Post* to support his claim that 1967 was "the year of the hawk"; with "one out of every four Americans favoring a nuclear attack upon North Vietnam if that were what would be necessary for victory," and increasing "[p]opular resentment toward militant expressions of antiwar protest" (p. 39; Gustainis, 1988; Mueller, 1973).

3. Goldzwig (1985) explains rhetorical failure as an "inability to transmit requisite values coupled with a perceived breach in rhetorical decorum" (p. 323).

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