

Clayborne Carson, Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner, Gary B. Nash. *The Struggle for Freedom. The Modern Era, Since 1930*. Pearson, 2019.

Chapter 19: Resistance, Repression, and Retrenchment, 1967-1978.

## 19.2 King and the Wars against Communism and Poverty, p. 434-436.

Martin Luther King was also reassessing his future in light of black power controversies and the upsurge in racial violence. Troubled by the increasing discontent in black communities, he did his best to steer a middle course between agitators like Hubert G. “Rap” Brown and Stokely Carmichael and more moderate civil rights leaders, such as NAACP leader Roy Wilkins or Whitney Young of the Urban League. He regretted that his differences with SBNCC’s new leaders had become embittered and public. Even while preferring to stay out of the increasingly intense national debate about the war in Vietnam, he did speak out when Georgia legislator objected to SNCC’s antiwar stance by refusing to seat newly elected state representative and former SNCC staff member Julian Bond. But otherwise King limited himself to calling for negotiated settlement of the conflict while encouraging his wife, Coretta, to continue her long-standing peace activism.

King felt increasingly concerned, however, that his cautious calls for negotiations did not slow the escalation of the war. “At best, I was a loud speaker but a quiet actor, while a charade was being performed,” he admitted later. Like other civil rights advocates, King saw that the African American freedom struggle was unable to transform legal rights into better living conditions for many poor black people. The political coalition that had achieved major civil reforms seemed to be disintegrating due to white resentment of black militancy and disputes over the Vietnam War. King worried that his public criticism of President Lyndon Johnson’s war policies, would end his access to the White House and alienate many SCLC donors. But as American bombing and troops levels increased and antiwar demonstrations intensified, images of burned and wounded children pushed him closer to a decisive stand on the war issue. In particular, he was disturbed by a photograph, in the January 1967 issue of the leftist magazine, *Ramparts*, that showed a Vietnamese mother holding her dead baby, killed in an American air attack. He decided he must take a stand. “Never again, “ he vowed to himself, “will I be silent on

an issue that is destroying the soul of our nation and destroying thousands and thousands of little children in Vietnam.”

Three months later, on April 1967, King made public his views on the war in an address to an overflow audience at New York City’s Riverside Church. Challenging those who said he should stick to racial issues, he charged that the war consumed funds that might otherwise be used to fight poverty in black communities. He also noted that black casualties in the war were disproportionately high. “We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society,” he charged, “and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem.” It was difficult, King said, to persuade African Americans to remain nonviolent while the nation used “massive doses of violence” in Vietnam: “I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government.” He warned, “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

Former SNCC chair John Lewis, in the audience at Riverside Church, recalled the speech as King’s “greatest,” and Stokely Carmichael was pleased when he heard King deliver his antiwar message at Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church. Many white antiwar activists also applauded King’s stand, but the NAACP’s Wilkins was sharply critical, concerned that the war issue would split the civil rights movement. Thurgood Marshall, then U. S. solicitor general, advised King not to divert his energy from civil rights reforms. FBI Director Hoover sent Johnson an ominous private note depicting King as “an instrument in the hands of subversive forces seeking to undermine our nation.”

Despite intense criticism, King refused to back down. “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of convenience, but where he stands in moments of challenge, moments of great crisis and controversy.” King told SCLC staff. King also believed it was necessary to move beyond civil rights legislation to eliminate economic inequalities in the North as well as the South. He found that the problems facing the Chicago Freedom Movement, SCLC’s first northern venture, were in some respects more difficult than southern legalized segregation. When he had confronted southern racists in Birmingham and Selma, northern white liberals and Democratic politicians at least offered verbal support, but white mobs in the

Chicago suburb of Cicero responded to his “open housing” marches with bricks and bottles as well as with racist epithets. “I can say that I had never seen, even in Mississippi, mobs as hostile and hate-filled as in Chicago.” King remarked.

Moreover, the Democratic machine of Mayor Richard Daley outmaneuvered King by publicly supporting his goals while refusing to make significant concessions. Although SCLC’s Operation Breadbasket, directed by former North Carolina A&T student activist and seminary student Jesse Jackson, did increase employment, and franchise ownership opportunities, for African American, the Chicago campaign produced few tangible gains. By the spring of 1967, King had become disgusted with the failure of Chicago officials to implement an open housing agreement. “The city’s inaction,” he warned, was “another hot coal on the smoldering fires of discontent and despair that are rampant in our black communities.”