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Southern Christian Leadership Conference

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Thank you for your recent letter to me.

I am sorry that my recent speeches on Vietnam has cost us your support. However, I feel that war is no longer, if it ever was, a valid way to solve international problems. Even the negative good served by a war against an evil force such as Hitler can no longer be considered worth the costly risk to mankind, for the ultimate weapons of today mean only the destruction of mankind. Man can no longer afford war. We must find a non-violent way to settle the problems of the world.

It has been my consistent belief and position that non-violence is the only true solution to the social problems of the world and of this country. The principle of love which has motivated so many to strike out against the evils of racism here in America must motivate us to protest the brutal destruction of the Vietnamese People. It would be false for those of us who have protested against the continuation of American oppressiveness of its black minority, to not also protest against the attempted continuation of colonialism in Vietnam. For the Vietnamese have been struggling for 30 years against massive Japanese, French and American occupation forces.

After participating in the defeat of Japanese militarism, the Vietnamese proclaimed their independence under the leadership of their war time commander against the Japanese - Ho Chi Minh. They likened their own course to that of the American patriots who fought in the Revolutionary War, quoting in their own historic documents from our own Declaration of Independence. They did not seek alliances with Moscow or Peking but petitioned to be made a member of the French Commonwealth. Their petition was refused. Their right to choose their own destiny was denied. They were thrown onto their own resources, and those of whoever might help them, while France waged a senseless and wasteful war of colonial suppression.

If North Vietnam is communist today, we have ourselves to blame. If they are alienated from America and American ideals we have ourselves to blame. For we rejected their appeal for friendship and understanding.

I do not intend to link the Civil Rights Movement organically to the Peace Movement. The Vietnam Summer Program and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference are in no way linked organizationally. I feel, however, that it is not possible for men of good will to segregate their principles for matters of expediency, tactics or any other reason. The presence of two evils requires us to speak out against the two evils.

I am not claiming for the Negro people special privileges to choose which war they wish to fight in, although this construction has unfortunately been placed on some of my remarks. I am, rather, stating general principles, which I believe that all men of good will can follow and adapt to their personal lives. However, I do feel that the Negro people, because of their peculiar experiences with oppression through the use of physical violence, have a particular responsibility to not participate in inflicting oppressive violence on another people. This is not a privilege but an exceptional moral responsibility, the weight of which is far from a happy burden.

I fear that much of America has failed to understand the full meaning of the non-violent method. Too many Americans support non-violence here within the United States of America for Negroes, but do not see in it, any such restrictions to the U.S. Government in its conduct of foreign policy. Such people who hold this contradictory position are not true believers in non-violence. So I say that it is wrong for anyone to praise me for my non-violent stand on Civil Rights and condemn me for being non-violent on Vietnam.

Finally, let me say that I have taken a stand against the war in Vietnam because my conscience leaves me with no other choice. I have been strongly influenced by the prophets of old and those who place the search for truth above expediency. I would like to hope that I am not a consensus leader, constantly determining what is right and wrong by taking a sort of Gallup poll of the majority opinion. Ultimately, a genuine leader is not a searcher of consensus, but a molder of consensus. On some positions, cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it right? There comes a time when one must take a stand that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because it is right. This is where I find myself today.

Sincerely yours,

Martin Luther King, Jr.