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How Obama Betrays Reverend King's Philosophy of Nonviolence

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Each year, many remember Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work on behalf of civil rights. Yet the most fundamental piece of his philosophical legacy, his rejection of the utility and morality of violence between individuals and nations, remains at best ignorantly obscured or at worst actively suppressed. In his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Rev. King wrote that "it is as possible and as urgent to put an end to war and violence between nations as it is to put an end to poverty and racial injustice."

When President Barack Obama received the Nobel Peace prize some in the peace movement noted the irony of awarding such a prize to a man overseeing multiple wars and hundreds of military bases around the world. What was most horrifying about Obama being awarded the peace prize was the content of his acceptance speech in which he defended the utility and morality of violence and war. Rather than merely ignoring the legacy of peacemakers before him, Obama used the speech as a full-frontal assault on the very philosophical tenets of nonviolence advocated by Gandhi and Rev. King.

On December 10, 2009, Obama followed in the footsteps of so many believers in war before him: letting out a cry for peace while loading his guns. In his Nobel Peace prize acceptance speech Obama said, "We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth that we will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes," said Obama. "There will be times when nations — acting individually or in concert — will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified." Later in his speech Obama stated plainly that "the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace."

Rev. King directly assailed those who proffered words of peace and love while they showered their enemies with bullets and bombs. "Many men cry 'Peace! Peace!' but they refuse to do the things that make for peace," wrote Rev. King. Summing up the philosophical tenet underwriting nonviolent direct action King continued: "One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal." In short, peace is both the means as well as the end.

According to newspaper reports, President Obama signed a guest book at the Nobel Institute in a room covered by photographs of former Nobel laureates including Rev. King. In his speech Obama acknowledged that Rev. King's weight was bearing down upon him. He recognized that his presidency was "a direct consequence of Dr. King's life's work" and commitment to "non-violence." Obama said he was "mindful of what Martin Luther King said in this same ceremony years ago: 'Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: It merely creates new and more complicated ones.'"

Obama was mindful but not convinced. He said that as the Commander and Chief, the Kings and Gandhis of the world could not be his sole guides. Perhaps he meant to say that they were not his guides at all. In his peace prize speech he defended both the utility and the morality of war and violence as a reliable means to achieve peace.

As if defending himself against the wisdom of prophetic peace makers' and perhaps his better conscience, Obama demanded that *this* war (Afghanistan, as if it mattered) was different. *This* was a truly necessary, just war. "I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people," said Obama. Continuing he said, "Negotiations cannot convince al-Qaida's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism — it is a recognition of history, the imperfections of man and the limits of reason."

The history Obama recognizes, however, is that cruel, blood-soaked fable of American Exceptionalism. Rev. King saw through this fraudulent cloak of Divine American Right when he observed, on April 4, 1967, that it was the United States that is "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."

Rev. King was not being hyperbolic. He merely fulfilled the call of justice to look beyond national heritage and to honestly assess the actions of his country. And so his heart and mind followed our nation's long trail of blood; he simply opened his eyes to the way in which his own nation's military which was rapidly destroying human life in Vietnam—one million civilians; to the way in which it had killed more than two million civilians killed in the Korean war (*American Foreign Relations*, Clifford, 2000), and tens of thousands of civilians destroyed in bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Since King made those remarks the U.S. only increased its commitment to resolving problems through militaristic means. For instance, we know that more than half-a-million Iraqis died as a direct result of George W. Bush's Iraq war. Enough of the sickening facts have come forth for us to be certain that our nation has engaged in systematic torture. If there were any doubt we need only turn to Major General Antonio Taguba, who retired from the army in January 2007 after writing a critical report on Abu Ghraib. Major General Taguba told the U.K paper, the *Daily*

Telegraph, that he has seen pictures which show U.S. prisoners experiencing "torture, abuse, rape and every indecency."

In a way that perhaps only the U.S.'s first black president could have done, President Obama seemed to attempt to marginalize and disappear Rev. King's message that the United States was on "the wrong side of the world revolution." "It is a sad fact that, because of comfort, complacency, a morbid fear of communism and our proneness to adjust to injustice, the Western nations that initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world have now become the arch anti-revolutionaries."

King continued to say that communism was a judgment on "our failure to make democracy real and to follow through on the revolutions we initiated." He then called for a reemergence of "the revolutionary spirit" and "eternal opposition to poverty, racism and militarism."

Perhaps President Obama's ascendancy up the staircase of power has left him dizzy and too far removed from the cause of peace and justice. Whatever the cause, it is now all too clear that he either does not know or refuses to recognize the injustices of U.S. militarism. Rather than recognizing our nation's foreign policy crimes, Obama merely referred to the inferior others, to the irrational barbarians who simply will not listen to reason – the reason of U.S. domination, the reason of corporate militarism from sea to shinning sea. According to Obama, the U.S. has never been on the wrong side of the world revolution. Obama did not acknowledge the way in which our government sponsors dictators, monopolizes resources, promotes wars of aggression, and complicity and sometimes directly oppresses Palestinians. Rather he defended the discredited narrative that Afghanistan is the central front in a war to stop evildoers who are at war with American liberty.

Standing on the world's stage, receiving a prize for peace, Obama stared straight into the eyes of Rev. King's legacy and declared not hostility but rather his loyalty to militarism. Rev. King called for America to "get on the right side of the world revolution" by undergoing a "radical revolution of values." Obama defended the American exceptionalism which has and continues to color U.S. militaristic violence in a divine shade of ineffability. Dismissing the hundreds of thousands left dead from the wars in

Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama described the U.S. as the world's great savior which never does wrong. "Whatever mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms." As if tearing out pages from reality and replacing them with the most egregious doublespeak Obama stated plainly: "America has never fought a war against a democracy, and our closest friends are governments that protect the rights of their citizens."

To hear Obama speak one would think the U.S. had never supported dictators in Cuba and Pakistan, overthrown democratically elected leaders in Iran, Chile, Guatemala; or aided attempted coups against popular Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez; or fomented aggression against popularly supported Bolivian president Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president; or trained military men responsible for the recent coup against President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras.

Yet Obama cannot merely plead ignorance. He is the one now directing U.S. militarism. In December 2009, Evo Morales told *Democracy Now!* that President Obama's administration looks to be worse than President Bush's in terms of interfering with Bolivian political affairs. Under President Obama the U.S. has escalated the use of drone air strikes in places like Pakistan. Last year counterinsurgency guru David Kilcullen told Congress that US drone strikes in Pakistan were backfiring and should be stopped: "Since 2006, we've killed 14 senior Al Qaeda leaders using drone strikes; in the same time period, we've killed 700 Pakistani civilians in the same area. The drone strikes are highly unpopular. And they've given rise to a feeling of anger that coalesces the population around the extremists and leads to spikes of extremism...." Most recently, just this month we've seen the U.S. engage in a tit for tat murder match with Al Qaeda.

It is precisely this faith in violence that Rev. King had in mind when he explained why he continued to "stand by nonviolence." In a speech which shares its name with his 1967 book, "Where Do We Go from Here," King explained: that "through violence you may murder a murderer but you can't murder murder...Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that."

Obama's belief in the Afghanistan war is precisely the futile attempt to murder murder, to blot out darkness with darkness.

According to a recent Afghan investigation, on December 28, 2009, U.S. special forces flew from Kabul, "descended from a plane Sunday night into Ghazi Khan Village in Narang district of the eastern province of Kunar and took 10 people from three homes, eight of them school students in grades six, nine and 10, one of them a guest, the rest from the same family, and shot them dead. Eight of those shot dead were confirmed as school students by the village school principle" ([Link to article](#)). The lead investigator, Assadullah Wafa, told The Times that "American troops" arrived outside of the village around 1am, "walked from the helicopters to the houses and, according to my investigation, they gathered all the students from two rooms, into one room, and opened fire." ([Link to article](#)). What better example is there for the pure insanity and inanity of militarism, of war, of Obama's war in Afghanistan? Who is so callous that their heart does not ache knowing their tax dollars afforded such evil?

Despite depicting Gandhi and King's philosophy of nonviolence as impractical, Obama urged all to be guided by "the love they preached." Yet "the love they preached" cannot be so easily pulled apart from the nonviolence and anti-militarism they preached. In sum, for all of his gestures of respect for Rev. King, President Obama's deeds have exacted nothing short of the betrayal of the fundamental legacy of peace and justice of the man whom made it possible for him to be president.

So as we commemorate the life and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the year 2010, let us recognize that the necessity and the supreme practicality of nonviolence. Let us join Rev. King in understanding militarism in the same way we think of racism: an instrument of violence and oppression. For the violence and terrorism we hate so much will not end until we force our government to realize that peace and justice can't be created via military operations that take the lives of innocent mothers, fathers, and children. The hate that fills our bullets and missiles will simply fertilize and enlarge the malevolence we seek to destroy. And in the process we may find

that we not only kill the innocent abroad, but that we lose our conscience and our very souls in the process.

While men like President Obama continue their faith in war let us hear Rev. King, and heed his call for a "peace offensive."