

# “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence”

April 4, 2024

## *UPDATED INTRODUCTION TO READING: Parts A and B*

= = = = = [ **Part A - First Reader** ] = = = = =

We gather today to honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the 56th anniversary of his tragic and untimely assassination, and the 57th anniversary of his prophetic speech, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.” We are here to call for an end to *all* wars and occupations around the world, an end to militarization of police in communities across the country, an end to gun violence, an end to poverty, and an end to nationalism, racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, and gender identity oppression. We are here to call instead for the redirection of resources from the industries of violence to providing for the wellbeing of all people everywhere and preservation of our endangered environment.

Two years ago, Bishop William J. Barber II and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, Co-chairs of the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, warned: “We are watching a war unfold with Russia’s attack on Ukraine that has huge ramifications for the entire world, especially the poor. As always is the case with war and violence, poor and low-income people lose the most.... This act of war is in part the result of a Christian nationalist project developed by Vladimir Putin and supported by the likes of Donald Trump and his followers. With the invoking of nuclear weapons, this reckless attack could lead to global disaster.”<sup>1</sup>

As that war rages on, with repeated nuclear threats by the Russian government, it has become even more dangerous. And now another brutal conflict is endangering our global security – and our humanity. Last November, Rev. Theoharis wrote: “There should.... be no contradiction between condemning Hamas for its heinous slaughter in the south of Israel and denouncing Israel for its decades-old dispossession and oppression of the Palestinian people and its now-indiscriminate killing and destruction in Gaza. There need be no contradiction between decrying terrorism and demanding diplomacy over violence. In truth, the Biden administration could use every nonmilitary tool at its disposal to pressure both Hamas and Israel to pursue an immediate ceasefire, the full release of all hostages, and whatever humanitarian assistance is now needed.”<sup>2</sup> At a vigil outside the White House, Bishop Barber declared: “We must join forces with Jews and Christians and Muslims around the world who are calling for a cease-fire in Gaza, and the safe return of all hostages and civilian prisoners.”<sup>3</sup>

In 2022, the most recent year for which we have data, world military expenditure reached a new high of \$2,240 billion. In 2022, the U.S. accounted for 39% of global military spending; more than the next 12 countries combined; more than ten times as much as Russia; and more than three times as much as China.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. maintains about 750 military bases in more than 70 countries, colonies, and territories.<sup>5</sup>

Last month the White House released its proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2025, including \$1.6 trillion in discretionary spending. \$69 out of every \$100 federal dollars in this proposal go toward militarization and its support systems, including \$850 billion for the Pentagon, \$34

billion for nuclear weapons, and \$11.6 billion in international military aid - *so far*. This leaves just \$31 out of every \$100 for everything else in the discretionary budget, from housing programs to public education, public health, environmental protection, and more.<sup>6</sup>

Responding to a new scientific study,<sup>7</sup> last summer Bishop Barber declared: “Today, poverty is the 4th leading cause of death nationwide. It is a death sentence for Americans. It is a moral travesty and a detriment to the soul of our nation that poverty kills more people than homicide yet the powers that be don’t want to address it.”<sup>8</sup>

The ongoing Ukraine crisis acutely reminds us that approximately 90 percent of all nuclear warheads are held by Russia and the United States, which each have around 4,000 warheads in their military arsenals.<sup>9</sup> Over the next 30 years, the United States plans to spend more than \$2 trillion to upgrade and replace its nuclear bombs and warheads, and the bombers, missiles and submarines that deliver them.<sup>10</sup>

*It is time to seek a different path.*

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Before the pandemic, 140 million Americans were living in poverty or one emergency away from economic ruin. That’s 43% of the nation and 52% of its children:<sup>11</sup> 60% of Black people; 64% of Hispanic/Latino people; 40% of Asian people; 60% of Indigenous and Native people; and 33% of white people. These tens of millions of people live in every region, state, and county in the country. Yet between 2020 and 2022, billionaire wealth grew by \$1.5 trillion - more than \$2 billion a day.<sup>12</sup>

In his “Beyond Vietnam” speech, Dr. King declared: “*A nation that continues year after year to spend more on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.*”

When Dr. King gave this speech, the United States was embroiled in the Vietnam War. The country was in turmoil as peace activists resisted the draft, and anti-war and civil rights protesters took to the streets. King’s speech laid bare the relationship between U.S. wars abroad and the racism and poverty being challenged by the civil rights movement at home. And it was controversial in some parts of the civil rights movement.

On this day of remembrance honoring Dr. King, we call on our country to reverse course and turn towards humanity, law, and decency. We honor the *full* legacy of Dr. King’s work opposing militarism, racism, and poverty - the “axis of evil” in the struggle for peace and justice.

The Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, has picked up Dr. King’s unfinished work, weaving the interlocking injustices of systemic racism, systemic poverty, environmental devastation, militarism and the war economy, and a distorted moral narrative of Christian nationalism that blames poor people for their own poverty and claims there’s “not enough,” into one “moral fusion” campaign.

This year’s participatory readings of “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” are part of the Poor People’s Campaign initiative to build momentum for the “Third Reconstruction Agenda to Heal the Nation: End Poverty and Low Wages From the Bottom Up.” Drawing on the

transformational history of the First Reconstruction following the Civil War and the Second Reconstruction of the civil rights struggles of the 20th century, the Third Reconstruction is a revival of our constitutional commitment to establish justice, provide for the general welfare, end decades of austerity, and recognize that policies that center the 140 million poor and low-income people in the country are also good economic policies that can heal and transform the nation.

The Third Reconstruction Agenda asks: “Did you know that, over the past 20 years, our government has spent more than \$21 trillion on war, militarizing the border, surveillance and a war economy that kills, incarcerates and criminalizes the poor at home and around the world? And it “[D]emand[s] that our government prioritize peace by reducing military spending by at least 10% now and redirecting those resources towards diplomacy, humanitarian aid and the priorities in this agenda. We demand that spending on mass incarceration, immigration enforcement and policing is redirected towards community-based infrastructure, programs and resources that prioritize communities most impacted by this violence.”<sup>13</sup>

We will now read the complete text of Dr. King’s speech, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” which he delivered on April 4, 1967, at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned, at Riverside Church in New York City, exactly one year before his assassination. ***Readers are requested not to change any of Dr. King’s words.***

We believe that Dr. King’s words were both precautionary and prophetic, providing both a diagnosis and a cure – “a true revolution of values” – for our society’s gravest illnesses, “the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism.”

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<sup>1</sup> [Statement on Russia’s attack on Ukraine from the co-chairs of the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, Bishop William J. Barber II and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis on Feb. 25, 2022 – Poor People’s Campaign \(poorpeoplescampaign.org\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [The Urgent Call for Peace in the Middle East - YES! Magazine Solutions Journalism \(yesmagazine.org\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Claiborne, Barber, Budde among Christian leaders calling for Gaza cease-fire at White House vigil \(religionnews.com\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [2304\\_fs\\_milex\\_2022.pdf \(sipri.org\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [750 US military bases remain around the planet | Responsible Statecraft](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Militarized Funding in Biden Budget Totals Well Over \\$1 Trillion \(and it will grow\) \(nationalpriorities.org\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Poverty is the 4th greatest cause of U.S. deaths | UCR News | UC Riverside](#)

<sup>8</sup> [‘An American Death Sentence’ – Poor People’s Campaign \(poorpeoplescampaign.org\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Status of World Nuclear Forces – Federation Of American Scientists \(fas.org\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2021 to 2030 | Congressional Budget Office \(cbo.gov\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> [There are 140 Million Poor and Low-Income People in the U.S. – Poor People’s Campaign \(poorpeoplescampaign.org\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> [2023-National-Fact-Sheet-8.5-x-11-in.pdf \(poorpeoplescampaign.org\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Third Reconstruction Agenda to Heal the Nation - Kairos Center](#)