

INTRODUCTION TO READING: Parts A and B

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We gather today to honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the 57th anniversary of his tragic and untimely assassination, and the 58th 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.

In 2023, the most recent year for which we have data, world military expenditure reached a record high of \$2,443 billion. In 2023, the U.S. accounted for 37% of global military spending; nearly as much as the next 10 countries combined; more than 8 times as much as Russia; and more than 3 times as much as China.¹ The U.S. maintains roughly 750 military bases in some 80 countries, colonies, and territories. It is estimated that the U.S. has three times as many bases as all other countries combined.²

Responding to a 2023 scientific study,³ Bishop William J. Barber II, National Co-Chair of the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, 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.”⁴

It is time to seek a different path.

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:⁵ 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.⁶

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.

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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.

Did you know that, in the two decades following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, our government 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?⁷

And, just last month, after threats of a government shutdown, Donald Trump signed the Republican-crafted Continuing Resolution into law. This Resolution extends Fiscal Year 2024 funding for discretionary spending through September 30, 2025, with some significant changes. While cutting \$13 billion from domestic spending categories, the Continuing Resolution increases funding for mass detention and deportations by \$621 million, adds \$185 million to nuclear weapons modernization, and provides a \$6 billion overall increase for the Pentagon.⁸

In the current era of chaos and uncertainty, Dr. King's speech remains vital to the ongoing call for a transformation in values. This call is revolutionary as it seeks a transition from distinctly American values rooted in capitalism and expressed through the triple evils of racism, poverty, and militarism, to values rooted in a beloved community characterized by justice, peace, and non-violence. Dr. King asserted that the war diverted resources that could be used to address the social issues of poverty and racism domestically. Unfortunately, the message continues to be as relevant today as it was in 1967.

The increasing commodification of humanity in favor of capitalism is exacerbating America's decline into what Dr. King described as Spiritual Death. Tragically, it also has resulted in poverty being the 4th leading cause of death in the United States. Furthermore, recent executive orders are significantly contributing to the nation's current spiritual and economic challenges.

Both in contemporary society and during Dr. King's era, mourning and grief are considered appropriate responses to the societal impacts referred to as Spiritual Death in American society. We must break the silence on the mourning and grief in this prophetic moment in American history. Mourning and grief can contribute to forming solidarity among us and help us transform our nation.

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.***

References

¹ https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404_fs_milex_2023.pdf

² <https://www.thesoldiersproject.org/how-many-us-military-bases-are-there-in-the-world/>

³ [Poverty is the 4th greatest cause of U.S. deaths | UCR News | UC Riverside](#)

⁴ [‘An American Death Sentence’ – Poor People's Campaign \(poorpeoplescampaign.org\)](#)

⁵ [There are 140 Million Poor and Low-Income People in the U.S. – Poor People's Campaign \(poorpeoplescampaign.org\)](#)

⁶ [2023-National-Fact-Sheet-8.5-x-11-in.pdf \(poorpeoplescampaign.org\)](#)

⁷ <https://truthout.org/articles/us-spent-21-trillion-on-war-and-militarization-since-9-11/>

⁸ <https://www.nationalpriorities.org/blog/2025/03/17/congress-boosts-war-machine-and-executive-power-while-cutting-services-working-people/>