

“Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence”

INTRODUCTION TO 2026 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 58th anniversary of his tragic and untimely assassination, and the 59th anniversary of his prophetic speech, **“Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.”**

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.

We have now been doing these annual readings in Oakland under five successive Administrations. And each year something new stands out that is directly relevant to the moment we’re in.

Today we are here to call for an end to *all* wars and occupations around the world, an end to ICE terrorization of our cities and 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, genuine 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 provide for the wellbeing of all people everywhere and preservation of our endangered environment.

In 2024, the most recent year for which we have data, the U.S. spent \$997 Billion on war preparations, accounting for 37% of global military spending; more than the next 9 countries combined; nearly 7 times as much as Russia; and more than 3 times as much as China.¹

Trump’s proposed 2027 budget, released on Friday, requests a 42 percent *increase* in military spending, bringing the total war budget to an unprecedented \$1.5 *Trillion*.² And this does not include the administration’s emergency request of \$200 Billion to support the senseless U.S.-Israeli war with Iran – a war officially being waged, in part, to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Meanwhile Trump wants to raise spending on U.S. nuclear weapons by 12 percent and develop new nuclear warheads.

Trump’s budget would massively increase funding for his inhumane mass deportation agenda, with Billions in new funding for ICE, while slashing or eliminating funding for what the budget calls “Green New Scam” programs, energy efficiency and renewable energy programs, and science.

At the same time, Trump’s budget proposes \$73 Billion³ in cuts to domestic programs, including programs to end homelessness, food and health grants for people with disabilities, rural small business grants, low-income home heating assistance, and fair housing programs, among countless others.⁴

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At an Easter lunch at the White House last week, Trump actually said, “We can't take care of daycare.... *we're fighting wars*.... it's not possible for us to take care of daycare. Medicaid, Medicare, all these individual things. They can do it on a state basis [but] you can't do it on a federal -- we have to take care of one thing, military protection, we have to guard the country.”⁵

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.”***

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 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 *actual* death in the United States.⁶

Both in contemporary society and during Dr. King's era, mourning and grief are considered appropriate responses to the societal impacts of “spiritual death.” In this prophetic moment in American history, we must break the silence on mourning and grief. Our shared mourning and grief can contribute to building solidarity among us and help us transform our nation.

In the current climate of chaos and uncertainty, Dr. King's speech remains vital to the call for a transformation in values. This call is revolutionary as it seeks a transition from 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 nonviolence.

We also are in a time of resurgent authoritarian nationalisms world-wide, and of white Christian nationalism here at home. As Dr. King told us more than half a century ago,

“We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for victims of our nation and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.”

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 [Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2024](#)

² [Budget of the U.S. Government](#)

³ [Trump seeks historic \\$1.5 trillion for military in Congress budget request | Donald Trump News | Al Jazeera](#)

⁴ [Trump's Budget Has Endless Funds for War, but Not Much to Help Americans](#)

⁵ <https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-remarks-easter-lunch-white-house-april-1-2026/>

⁶ [Poverty is the 4th greatest cause of U.S. deaths | UCR News | UC Riverside](#)