

In this speech, Martin Luther King makes a compelling and emotionally resonant argument against war in Vietnam, which he views as part of the "poisoning" of the soul of America. His reasoning draws on a variety of sources, from pragmatic economic reasoning, to the philosophy of race, to criticism of the cognitive dissonance required to preach peace in the US but violence abroad. All through the speech, King's powerful word choice adds to the strength of his "incandescently clear" thesis statement.

The first line of reasoning that King pursues concerns allocation of resources. Citing the needs of impoverished American citizens, King claims that the country "would never invest the necessary funds in rehabilitation of the poor" so long as this money is being diverted toward military action in Vietnam. In saying this, King argues — convincingly — that we should prioritize programs which improve the lives of Americans in lower socioeconomic classes. This characterization of the war as "an enemy of the poor" makes a powerful appeal to the empathy of the listener.

King goes on to argue against the war from the perspective of social justice. In a country which actively segregates black and white citizens, it is hypocritical and unjust (a "cruel irony," he says) to send so many black Americans to die in Vietnam. His argument is bolstered by King's use of the



statistical evidence that a much higher proportion of African American citizens are sent to "fight and die" than other subgroups of the population. Here he implicitly argues that one should not support war in Vietnam because it is intrinsically racist, killing more blacks than whites.

However, King's strongest argument emerges when he anticipates a possible criticism of his stance: why should King, a "civil rights leader," speak on this issue of foreign policy which is outside his domain? He turns this objection around by arguing that to do otherwise is hypocritical: any listener who believes that violence is an unacceptable tool for achieving social change in the US must also concede that violence is unacceptable in Vietnam.

How can one denounce violence "in the ghettos," King argues, "without also believing that the government's 'massive doses of violence' in Vietnam are unjust? Here, King begins with a supposition that many listeners would grant - that "nonviolent action" is the key to domestic issues - and argues that it follows that military action is unjustified.

While making these points, King draws upon his experience as a preacher to strengthen his rhetoric with appeals to pathos. His language about the "soul of America" evokes ideas of biblical morality and religion, indirectly suggesting that war in Vietnam is sinful or leads to damnation. His



description of the war as a "demonic destructive suction tube" which leaves anti-poverty programs "broken and eviscerated" again invites the listener to picture the war as an evil endeavor to be stopped. His stirring words that it should be "incandescently clear" that anyone who cares for the "integrity and life of America" should oppose the war likewise appeals to the listener's self-image — if I am a good person, his audience might think to themselves, then I must take action.

In short, King's rhetoric and reasoning are powerful and effective. If one wants to allocate resources to help the poor, or to treat black and white Americans equally, or to hold a consistent worldview which prescribes nonviolent protest — as King argues — then one must also accept his thesis that American involvement in Vietnam is unjust. This logos is balanced by King's appeals to pathos, using religious imagery and citing morality to advance his point. The net effect of these linguistic devices is to create a convincing and logically sound case for pacifism.