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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Vietnam War (1965) | [Next entry](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_vivian_cordy_tindell_1924) | |
| Four years after President [John F. Kennedy](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kennedy_john_fitzgerald_1917_1963/) sent the first American troops into Vietnam, Martin Luther King issued his first public statement on the war. Answering press questions after addressing a Howard University audience on 2 March 1965, King asserted that the war in Vietnam was ‘‘accomplishing nothing’’ and called for a negotiated settlement (Schuette, ‘‘King Preaches on Non-Violence’’).   While King was personally opposed to the war, he was concerned that publicly criticizing U.S. foreign policy would damage his relationship with President [Lyndon B. Johnson](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_johnson_lyndon_baines_1908_1973/), who had been instrumental in passing civil rights legislation and who had declared in April 1965 that he was willing to negotiate a diplomatic end to the war in Vietnam. Though he avoided condemning the war outright, at the August 1965 annual [Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_southern_christian_leadership_conference_sclc/) convention King called for a halt to bombing in North Vietnam, urged that the United Nations be empowered to mediate the conflict, and told the crowd that ‘‘What is required is a small first step that may establish a new spirit of mutual confidence … a step capable of breaking the cycle of mistrust, violence and war’’ (King, 12 August 1965). He supported Johnson’s calls for diplomatic negotiations and economic development as the beginnings of such a step. Later that year King framed the issue of war in Vietnam as a moral issue: ‘‘as a minister of the gospel,’’ he said, ‘‘I consider war an evil. I must cry out when I see war escalated at any point’’ (‘‘Opposes Vietnam War’’).   King’s opposition to the war provoked criticism from members of Congress, the press and from his civil rights colleagues who argued that expanding his civil rights message to include foreign affairs would harm the black freedom struggle in America. Fearful of being labeled a Communist, which would diminish the impact of his civil rights work, King tempered his criticism of U.S. policy in Vietnam through late 1965 and 1966. His wife, [Coretta Scott King](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_coretta_scott_1927_2006/), took a more active role in opposing the war, speaking at a rally at the Washington Monument on 27 November 1965 with [Benjamin Spock](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_spock_benjamin_1903_1998/), the renowned pediatrician and anti-war activist and joined in other demonstrations.   In December 1966, testifying before a congressional subcommittee on budget priorities, King argued for a ‘‘rebalancing’’ of fiscal priorities away from America’s ‘‘obsession’’ with Vietnam and toward greater support for anti-poverty programs at home (Semple, ‘‘Dr. King Scores Poverty’’). King led his first anti-war march in Chicago on 25 March 1967, and reinforced the connection between war abroad and injustice at home: ‘‘The bombs in Vietnam explode at home—they destroy the dream and possibility for a decent America’’ (‘‘Dr. King Leads Chicago’’). A few days later, King made it clear that his peace work was not undertaken as the leader of the SCLC, but ‘‘as an individual, as a clergyman, as one who is greatly concerned about peace’’ (‘‘Dr. King to Weigh Civil Disobedience’’).   Less than two weeks after leading his first Vietnam demonstration, on 4 April 1967, King made his best known and most comprehensive statement against the war. Seeking to reduce the potential backlash by framing his speech within the context of religious objection to war, King addressed a crowd of 3,000 people at Riverside Church in New York City, King delivered a speech entitled ‘‘[Beyond Vietnam.](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_beyond_vietnam_4_april_1967/)’’ pointing out that the war effort was ‘‘taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem’’ (King, ‘‘Beyond Vietnam,’’ 143).   Although the peace community lauded King’s willingness to take a public stand against the war in Vietnam, many within the civil rights movement further distanced themselves from his stance. The [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_national_association_for_the_advancement_of_colored_people_naacp1/), for example, issued a statement against merging the civil rights and peace movements. Undeterred, King, Spock, and [Harry Belafonte](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_belafonte_harry_1927/) led 100,000 demonstrators on an anti-war march to the United Nations on 15 April 1967.   During the last year of his life, King worked with Spock to develop ‘‘Vietnam Summer,’’ a volunteer project to increase grassroots peace activism in time for the 1968 elections. King linked his anti-war and civil rights work in speeches throughout the country, where he described the three problems he saw plaguing the nation: racism, poverty, and the war in Vietnam. In his last Sunday sermon, delivered at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., on 31 March 1968, King said that he was ‘‘convinced that [Vietnam] is one of the most unjust wars that has ever been fought in the history of the world’’ (King, ‘‘Remaining Awake,’’ 219). Nearly five years after King’s [assassination](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kings_assassination_4_april_1968/), American troops withdrew from Vietnam and a peace treaty declared South and North Vietnam independent of each other.  **SOURCES**  Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 2006. ‘‘Dr. King Leads Chicago Peace Rally,’’ *New York Times*, 26 March 1967. ‘‘Dr. King to Weigh Civil Disobedience If War Intensiï¬es,’’ *New York Times*, 2 April 1967. ‘‘Dr. Martin Luther King: Beyond Vietnam and Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution,’’ 90th Cong., 2d sess. Congressional Record 114 (9 April 1968): 9391–9397.  Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 1986.  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