

## **The Three Evils of Society**

By Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Mr. Chairman, friends, and brothers in this first gathering of the National Conference on New Politics. Ladies and gentlemen:

Seldom if ever has such a diverse and truly ecumenical gathering convened under the egis of politics in our nation. And I want to commend the leadership of the National Conference on New Politics for all of the great work that they have done in making this significant convention possible. Indeed, by our very nature we affirm that something new is taking place on the American political horizon.

We have come here from the dusty plantations of the Deep South and the depressing ghettos of the North. We have come from the great universities and the flourishing suburbs. We have come from Appalachian poverty and from conscious stricken wealth. But we have come. And we have come here because we share a common concern for the moral health of our nation. We have come because our eyes have seen through the superficial glory and glitter of our society and observed the coming of judgment. Like the prophet of old, we have read the handwriting on the wall. We have seen our nation weighed in the balance of history and found wanting. We have come because we see this as a dark hour in the affairs of men. For most of us this is a new mood. We are traditionally the idealists. We are the marchers from Mississippi and Selma and Washington, who staked our lives on the American Dream during the first half of this decade. Many assembled here campaigned for Lyndon Johnson in 1964 because we could not stand idly by and watch our nation contaminated by the 18th century policies of Goldwaterism. We were the hardcore activists who were willing to believe that Southerners could be reconstructed in the constitutional image. We were the dreamers of a dream that dark yesterdays of man's inhumanity to man would soon be transformed into bright tomorrows of justice. Now it is hard to escape, the disillusionment of betrayal. Our hopes have been blasted and our dreams have been shattered.

The promise of a Great Society was shipwrecked off the coast of Asia, on the dreadful peninsula of Vietnam. *The poor, black and white, are still perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.* What happens to a dream deferred? It leads to bewildering frustration and corroding bitterness. I came to see this in a personal experience here in Chicago last summer. In all the speaking that I have done in the United States before varied audiences, including some hostile whites, the only time I have ever been booed was one night in our regular weekly mass meetings by some angry young men of our movement.

I went home that night with an ugly feeling. Selfishly, I thought of my suffering and sacrifices over the last twelve years. Why would they boo one so close to them? But as I lay awake thinking, I finally came to myself. And I could not for the life of me have less impatience and understanding for those young men. For twelve years, I and others like me, have held out radiant promises of progress. I had preached to them about my dream. I had lectured to them about, the not too distant day when they would have freedom, all here, now. I had urged them to have faith in America and in white society. Their hopes had soared. They were now booing me because they felt that we were unable to deliver on our promises. They were booing because we had urged them to have faith in people who had too often proved to be unfaithful. They were now hostile because they were watching the dream that they had so readily accepted, turn into a frustrating nightmare. This situation is all the more ominous, in view of the rising expectations of men the world over. The deep rumblings that we hear today—the rumblings of discontent—is the thunder of disinherited masses rising from dungeons of oppression to the bright hills of freedom. All over the world like a fever, freedom is spreading in the widest liberation movement in history. The great masses of people are determined to end the exploitation of their races and lands. And in one majestic chorus they are singing in the words of our freedom song, "ain't gonna let nobody turn us around".

And, so, the collision course is set. The people cry for freedom and the Congress attempts to legislate repression. Millions, yes billions, are appropriated for mass murder; but the most meager pittance for foreign aid for international development is crushed in the surge of reaction. Unemployment rages at a major depression level in the black ghettos, but the bi-partisan response is an anti-riot bill rather than a serious poverty program. The modest proposals for model cities, rent supplement and rat control, pitiful as they were to begin with, get caught in the maze of congressional inaction. And I submit to you tonight, that a Congress that proves to be more anti-negro than anti-rat needs to be dismissed.

It seems that our legislative assemblies have adopted Nero as their patron saint and are bent on fiddling while our cities burn. Even when the people persist and, in the face of great obstacles, develop indigenous leadership and self-help approaches to their problems and finally tread the forest of bureaucracy to obtain existing government funds, the corrupt political order seeks to crush even this beginning of hope. The case of CDGM in Mississippi is the most publicized example, but it is a story repeated many times across our nation. Our own experience here in Chicago is especially painfully present. After an enthusiastic approval by H.E.W's Department of Adult Education, SCLC began an adult literacy project to aid 1,000 young men and women who have been pushed out of overcrowded ghetto schools, in obtaining basic literacy skills prerequisite to receiving jobs.

We had an agreement with A&P stores for 750 jobs through SCLC's job program, Operation Breadbasket, and had recruited over 500 pupils the first week. At that point Congressmen Pucinski and the Daley machine intervened and demanded that Washington cut off our funds or channel them through the machine-controlled poverty program in Chicago. Now we have no problem with administrative supervision, but we do have a desire to be independent of machine control and the Democratic Party patronage network. For this desire for a politically independent approach to the needs of our brothers, our funds are being stopped as of September 15 and a very meaningful program discontinued.

Yes, the hour is dark, evil comes forth in the guise of good. It is a time of double talk when men in high places have a high blood pressure of deceptive rhetoric and an anemia of concrete performance. *We cry out against welfare hand-outs to the poor but generously approve an oil depletion allowance to make the rich, richer. Six Mississippi plantations receive more than a million dollars a year, not to plant cotton. But no provision is made to feed the tenant farmer who is put out of work by the government subsidy.*

The crowning achievement in hypocrisy must go to those staunch Republicans and Democrats of the Midwest and West who were given land by our government when they came here as immigrants from Europe. They were given education through the land grant colleges. They were provided with agricultural agents to keep them abreast of forming trends; they were granted low interest loans to aid in the mechanization of their farms. And now that they have succeeded in becoming successful, they are paid not to farm. And these are the same people that now say to black people, whose ancestors were brought to this country in chains and who were emancipated in 1863 without being given land to cultivate or bread to eat, that they must pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. *What they truly advocate is Socialism for the rich and Capitalism for the poor.*

I wish that I could say that this is just a passing phase in the cycle of our nation's life. Certainly times of war, times of reaction throughout the society. But I suspect that we are now experiencing the coming to the surface of a triple-prong sickness that has been lurking within our body politic from its very beginning. That is **the sickness of racism, excessive materialism, and militarism**. Not only is this our nation's dilemma it is the plague of western civilization. As early as 1906, W. E. B. Dubois prophesized that the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be the problem of the color line. Now as we stand two-thirds into this crucial period of history, we know full well that racism is still that hound of hell which dogs the tracks of our civilization.

Ever since the birth of our nation, White America has had a schizophrenic personality on the question of race. She has been torn between selves. A self in

which she proudly professes the great principle of democracy and a self in which she madly practices the antithesis of democracy. This tragic duality has produced a strange indecisiveness and ambivalence toward the Negro, causing America to take a step backwards simultaneously with every step forward on the question of Racial Justice; to be at once attracted to the Negro and repelled by him, to love and to hate him. There has never been a solid, unified, and determined thrust to make justice a reality for Afro-Americans.

The step backward has a new name today. It is called the white backlash. But the white backlash is nothing new. It is the surfacing of old prejudices, hostilities, and ambivalences that have always been there. It was caused neither by the cry of black power nor by the unfortunate recent wave of riots in our cities. The white backlash of today is rooted in the same problem that has characterized America ever since the black man landed in chains on the shores of this nation.

This does not imply that all White Americans are racist. Far from it. Many white people have, through a deep moral compulsion, fought long and hard for racial justice. Nor does it mean that America has made no progress in her attempt to cure the body politic of the disease of racism or that the dogma of racism has not been considerably modified in recent years. However, for the good of America, it is necessary to refute the idea that the dominant ideology in our country, even today, is freedom and equality while racism is just an occasional departure from the norm on the part of a few bigoted extremists.

**Racism can well be that corrosive evil that will bring down the curtain on western civilization.** Arnold Toynbee has said that some twenty-six civilizations have risen upon the face of the Earth, almost all of them have descended into the junk heaps of destruction. The decline and fall of these civilizations, according to Toynbee, was not caused by external invasions but by internal decay. They failed to respond creatively to the challenges impinging upon them.

If America does not respond creatively to the challenge to banish racism, some future historian will have to say that a great civilization died because it lacked the soul and commitment to make justice a reality for all men.

**The second aspect of our afflicted society is extreme materialism.** An Asian writer has portrayed our dilemma in candid terms. He says, "You call your thousand material devices labor saving machinery. Yet you are forever busy. With the multiplying of your machinery, you grow increasingly fatigued, anxious, nervous, dissatisfied. *Whatever you have you want more, and wherever you are you want to go somewhere else.* Your devices are neither time saving nor soul-saving machinery. They are so many sharp spurs which urge you on to invent more machinery and to do more business."

This tells us something about our civilization that cannot be cast aside as a prejudiced charge by an eastern thinker who is jealous of Western prosperity. We cannot escape the indictment. This does not mean that we must turn back the clock of scientific progress. No one can overlook the wonders that science has wrought for our lives. The automobile will not abdicate in favor of the horse and buggy or the train in favor of the stagecoach or the tractor in favor of the hand plow or the scientific method in favor of ignorance and superstition.

But our moral lag must be redeemed. When scientific power outruns moral power, we end up with guided missiles and misguided men. When we foolishly maximize the minimum and minimize the maximum, we sign the warrant for our own day of doom. It is this moral lag in our thing-oriented society that blinds us to the human reality around us and encourages us in the greed and exploitation which creates the sector of poverty in the midst of wealth.

Again, we have diluted ourselves into believing the myth: that Capitalism grew and prospered out of the protestant ethic of hard work and sacrifice. The fact is that **Capitalism was built on the exploitation and suffering of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor – both black and white, both here and abroad.** If Negroes and poor whites do not participate in the free flow of wealth within our economy, they will forever be poor, giving their energies, their talents and their limited funds to the consumer market but reaping few benefits and services in return.

*The way to end poverty is to end the exploitation of the poor, ensure them a fair share of the government services and the nation's resources. I proposed recently that a national agency be established to provide employment for everyone needing it. Nothing is more socially inexcusable than unemployment in this age. In the 30s, when the nation was bankrupt, it instituted such an agency, the WPA. In the present conditions of a nation glutted with resources, it is barbarous to condemn people desiring work to soul-sapping inactivity and poverty. I am convinced that even this one, massive act of concern will do more than all the state police and armies of the nation to quell riots and still hatreds.*

The tragedy is that our materialistic culture does not possess the statesmanship necessary to do it. Victor Hugo could have been thinking of 20<sup>th</sup> Century America when he wrote, "There's always more misery among the lower classes than there is humanity in the higher classes".

The time has come for America to face the inevitable choice between materialism and humanism. We must devote at least as much to our children's education and the health of the poor as we do to the care of our automobiles and the building of beautiful, impressive hotels. *We must also realize that the*

*problems of racial injustice and economic injustice cannot be solved without a radical redistribution of political and economic power.*

We must further recognize that the ghetto is a domestic colony. Black people must develop programs that will aid in the transfer of power and wealth into the hands of residents of the ghetto so that they may, in reality, control their own destinies. *This is the meaning of New Politics.* People of will in the larger community, must support the black man in this effort.

**The final phase of our national sickness is the disease of militarism.** Nothing more clearly demonstrates our nation's abuse of military power than our tragic adventure in Vietnam. This war has played havoc with the destiny of the entire world. It has torn up the Geneva Agreement. It has seriously impaired the United Nations. *It has exacerbated the hatred between continents and, worse still, between races.* It has frustrated our development at home—telling our own underprivileged citizens that we place insatiable military demands above their most critical needs. It has greatly contributed to the forces of reaction in America and strengthened the military industrial complex. And, it has practically destroyed Vietnam and left thousands of American and Vietnamese youth maimed and mutilated and exposed the whole world to the risk of nuclear warfare. Above all, the War in Vietnam, has revealed what Senator Fulbright calls, "our nation's arrogance of power".

*We are arrogant in professing to be concerned about the freedom of foreign nations while not setting our own house in order.* Many of our Senators and Congressmen vote joyously to appropriate billions of dollars for the War in Vietnam, and many of these same Senators and Congressmen vote loudly against a Fair Housing Bill to make it possible for a Negro veteran of Vietnam to purchase a decent home. We arm Negro soldiers to kill on foreign battlefields but offer little protection for their relatives from beatings and killings in our own South. We are willing to make a Negro 100% of a citizen in Warfare but reduce him to 50% of a citizen on American soil.

No war in our nation's history has ever been so violative of our conscience, our national interest and so destructive of our moral standing before the world. No enemy has ever been able to cause such damage to us as we inflict upon ourselves.

The inexorable decay of our urban centers has flared into terrifying domestic conflict as the pursuit of foreign war absorbs our wealth and energy. Squalor and poverty scar our cities as our military might destroy cities in a far-off land to support oligarchy, to intervene in domestic conflict. The President, who cherishes consensus for peace, has intensified the war in answer to a cry to stop the war. It has brought tauntingly to one minute's flying time from China to a moment before the midnight of world conflagration. We are offered a tax for war instead

of a plan for peace. Men of reason should no longer debate the merits of war or means of financing war. They should end the war and restore sanity and humanity to American policy. And if the will of the people continues to be unheeded, all men of good will must create a situation in which the 1967- 68 elections are made a referendum on the War. The American people must have an opportunity to vote into oblivion those who cannot detach themselves from militarism, and those who lead us.

So, we are here because we believe, we hope, we pray that something new might emerge in the political life of this nation which will produce a new man, new structures, and institutions and a new life for mankind. I am convinced that this new life will not emerge until our nation undergoes a radical revolution of values. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, *the giant triplets of racism, economic exploitation and militarism* are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will only be an initial act. One day the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It understands that an edifice which produces beggars, needs restructuring.

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look at thousands of working people displaced from their jobs, with reduced incomes as a result of automation, while the profits of the employers remain intact and say, "this is not just."

It will look across the ocean and see individual Capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia and Africa only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries and say, "this is not just."

It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America and say, "this is not just."

A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war, "this way of settling differences is not just."

*This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's home with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of*

*people normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloodied battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love.*

A nation that continues year after year, to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

So, what we must all see is that these are revolutionary times. All over the globe, men are revolting against old systems of exploitation, and out of the wombs of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the Earth are rising up as never before. The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. We in the west must support these revolutions. It is a sad fact that because of comfort, complacency, a morbid fear of Communism, and our proneness to adjust to injustice, the Western nations that initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world have now become the arch anti-revolutionaries.

This has driven many to feel that only Marxism has the revolutionary spirit. In a sense, Communism is a judgment of our failure to make democracy real and to follow through on the revolutions that we initiated. Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes-hostile world, *declaring eternal opposition to poverty, racism, and militarism*. With this powerful commitment, we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores and thereby speed the day when every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.

*May I say in conclusion that there is a need now, more than ever before, for men and women in our nation to be creatively maladjusted.* Mr. Davis said, and I say to you that, I choose to be among the maladjusted, As my good friend Bill Coffin said, there are those who have criticized me and many of you for taking a stand against the War in Vietnam and for seeking to say to the nation that the issues of Civil Rights cannot be separated from the issues of peace.

I want to say to you tonight that I intend to keep these issues mixed because they are mixed. Somewhere, we must see that justice is indivisible. **Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.** And, **I have fought too long and too hard against segregated public accommodations to end up, at this point in my life, segregating my moral concerns.**

So let us stand in this convention knowing that on some positions cowardice asks the question: is it safe; expediency asks the question: is it politic; vanity asks the question: is it popular, but conscious asks the question: is it right. And on some positions, it is necessary for the moral individual to take a stand that is neither



safe, nor politic, nor popular; but he must do it because it is right. And we say to our nation tonight, we say to our government, we even say to our FBI, "We will not be harassed; we will not make a butchery of our conscience; we will not be intimidated; and we will be heard.