



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.



Community Action

More than a half-century later, Dr. King's prophetic words still reverberate

May 25, 2017 | Vol. 4 No. 21

...We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

On a previous occasion, I devoted this column to the discussion of what Dr. King famously referred to as the “giant triplets” of evil. Nonetheless, in light of the tumultuous wave of dread and despair that washes over our nation, I am compelled to revisit the dire warning that one of the world’s greatest leaders signaled to us just over 50 years ago.

It was on April 4, 1967, that Dr. King stood before two-thousand riveted onlookers in the Riverside Church on Manhattan’s Upper West Side and delivered one of the most profound and provocative speeches of his lifetime. Titled “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence,” Dr. King’s uncompromising sermon was met with derision from many political and media circles as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* referred to it respectively as an “error” and a “tragedy.” The *Chicago Tribune* editorial page argued that Dr. King had crossed a line while *Life Magazine* called it a “disservice” to the cause of Civil Rights.

A number of scholars have intimated that in giving this address, Dr. King summoned, perhaps knowingly, his own death sentence. And, exactly one year to the day he was taken from us on a hotel balcony in Memphis. There is no question that the work Dr. King and other leaders, as well as the thousands upon thousands of nameless, faceless activists from the Civil Rights and other social movements accomplished a lot.

Yet today, a half-century after Dr. King’s Riverside Church speech, where do we find ourselves? What have we learned as a society, if anything? To my mind, the current economic and socio-political climate in America seems dangerously poised to expand its all-out assault on the poor, people of color, children and seniors, working and middle-class families, and other vulnerable populations.

So, let’s consider the world today through the lens of Dr. King’s “giant triplets” of evil starting with militarism. It occurs to me that the young people in the high school graduating class of 2017 aren’t likely to remember a time in their lives when America was not at war. And as death and devastation continue to plague the war-torn regions of the world, rumors and threats of new wars remain ever-present all over the globe. In this century alone millions of people, many of whom were non-combatants, have died as either direct or indirect casualties of war, while millions more have been displaced.

What about racism? Forty years after the assassination of Dr. King, America elected its first African American president, a historical milestone that many pundits erroneously suggested marked the dawning of a post-racial America. However, for all of the hope, elation, and emotion that President Obama's election inspired, it seemed to have also sounded a clarion call to those among us who still hold racist ideas and attitudes. Today, those attitudes coupled with the hostile and sometimes violent actions that accompany them appear to have only been emboldened as a result of the most recent election cycle.

In his 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois noted that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line." Although progress was made, that problem was clearly not solved. And, a little more than 100 years later, Minnesota's very own Prince sang in 2009's *Dreamer*, "The 21st century, oh what a shame, what a shame. That race, race still matters."

Finally, let's focus on Dr. King's admonition of extreme materialism. In its latest report, Oxfam International, which has documented the

mounting wealth and income gaps for decades, reveals that the richest one percent now owns more than the rest of the 99% combined. Moreover, the richest eight men on the planet have accumulated as much wealth as the poorest 3.6 billion people (half the world's population). Still, in the midst of such absurdity, critical resources for early childhood development education, healthcare, food support, and a multitude of other programs and services are at serious risk.

It has become rather trendy in the last thirty years or so for individuals of all political stripes to invoke Dr. King's name as one of history's most consummate pillars of freedom, justice, and equality. Why then, does our morality consistently fail to match our rhetoric?

Clarence Hightower is the Executive Director of Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties. Dr. Hightower holds a Ph.D. in urban higher education from Jackson State University. He welcomes reader responses to 450 Syndicate Street North, St. Paul, MN 55104