

# Dr. Martin Luther King: Beyond Civil Rights

By Bill Jeffers

**Introduction:** In this unit, students will study Dr. King beyond his more well-known role in the civil rights movement, specifically his stance against the Vietnam War and its economic and social costs to society. By examining Dr. King's evolving views on Vietnam and his treatment by the FBI, students develop a deeper, more compassionate understanding of Dr. King. While studying Dr. King's speeches, students also examine the role of nonviolent protest within broader concepts of patriotism and dissent.

**Grades:** 9-12

**CA State Standards:** 11.9, 11.10

## Essential Questions:

What was Dr. King's stance on the Vietnam War? Can he be considered a patriot, given his views?

## Sub-Questions:

- Does Dr. King's "I have a Dream" Speech accurately capture his legacy?
- What is his legacy beyond his well-known role in the civil rights movement?
- What was his involvement in the Vietnam War protest movement?
- Was there a progression in his views on the Vietnam War? Why or why not?
- Did his views and actions embody the counter-culture?
- Was his dissent patriotic?

## Unit Parts:

1. Dr. King's Views on the Vietnam War
2. Dr. King's Growing Opposition
3. War as a Negative Good?

## Part One: Dr. King's Views on the Vietnam War

### Materials Needed:

- Classroom set of [Dr. King's Address at Mass Rally at the Ninth Annual SCLC Convention](#) on August 12, 1965 in Birmingham, Alabama.

### Activities/Instructions:

1. **Opening Activity:** Ask students to do a five minute freewrite on the prompt "Define patriotism. Provide two examples of patriots." In the subsequent discussion, students often provide traditional examples like Washington, Jefferson, Kennedy, and Lincoln. To highlight the central theme of the unit, react dramatically by stating: "Washington was a terrorist and Jefferson promoted Civil War," then analyze your provocative statement with the class. Ask students to look at Washington from the perspective of King George III, or think of [Jefferson and the Kentucky Resolves](#) – the first thought of succession. Spend 10-30 minutes examining the idea of labels and who applies the labels with your class. This exercise provides students the opportunity to critically evaluate traditional ideas, terms, and concepts. Consider expanding the discussion of patriotism to evaluate the role of protesters against the Iraq War or health care reform.
2. **Warm-up (group activity):** Have students brainstorm an answer to the question: "What do we know about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?" The variety of answers will probably relate to King's work in the Civil Rights Movement. Write these on the board in the appropriate column of a KWL (What I know, What I want to know, What I have learned) chart. Then ask students: "What was Dr. King's involvement in Vietnam War protests?" Few, if any, students have knowledge of Dr. King's involvement.
3. Distribute the classroom set of Dr. King's address detailing his thoughts on the Vietnam conflict, delivered at the Ninth Annual SCLC convention. Have students work in groups to record their questions while reading the document.
4. Write students' questions on the board and discuss possible answers. Conduct a class discussion using the following guiding questions:
  - Who does Dr. King blame and why?
  - Do you see any predictions or assessments that either came true or exist today?
  - What possible reasons did Dr. King have for not protesting more vocally?
5. Consider placing the information discussed in the KWL chart.
6. Ask students to do a show of hands to the question: "Is Dr. King's behavior patriotic at this point?" There will be multiple views so let students discuss as appropriate.
7. **Homework:** Using the class history textbook or the internet, have students find the number of troops in Vietnam and create a chart/graph that shows increasing numbers over the duration of the war. Ask students to also research Operation

Rolling Thunder. Vietnam War statistical information can be found at:  
<http://www.archives.gov/research/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html>

**Notes from Bill's Classroom:**

This lesson went very well in class as students were actively engaged after the Washington/Jefferson comments. During the discussion on Dr King's address, students struggled for a couple of reasons: 1) they are not used to Dr. King outside Civil Rights, and 2) the speech, while well written, is diplomatic, which frustrates students.

The discussion in response to the third question listed above in Activity 4 can easily take 20 minutes as students may have difficulty understanding why Dr. King did not protest more. I gave students several minutes and asked them to view Dr. King's decision from the perspective of his role as a civil rights leader and his responsibilities towards the success of the movement.



## Part Two: Dr. King's "Beyond Vietnam" Speech at Riverside Church

### Materials Needed:

- Class set of Dr. King's "[Beyond Vietnam](#)" speech, delivered at Riverside Church, NY, on April 4, 1967.

### Activities/Instructions:

1. Review/compare homework – growth of American troop deployment in Vietnam – in a class discussion.
2. Have students read Riverside Speech in their groups from the previous day and compare it to Dr. King's address delivered at the SCLC convention in '65. Ask students to underline particularly opinionated statements. Using their notes on the '65 speech, have students examine changes in Dr. King's views of Vietnam over those two years.
3. Have students share their notes and opinions on the progression of Dr. King's views with the class. Trace his growing opposition to the war. Key concepts to cover include the meaning of 'conscientious objector' and the idea of placing blame on the US.
4. Revisit the earlier discussion on patriotism and dissent from the previous class. With the new information, do we consider Dr. King a patriot? Why or why not? Have students reflect on what changed in their opinion from the previous class, if anything.
5. **Homework:** Provide students with take home copies of the "Beyond Vietnam" Riverside Church speech. Using their notes and the speech, have students develop two questions for further discussion, for homework. These could cover terms, concepts, or changes in points of view.

### Notes from Bill's Classroom:

The statistics portion of this lesson is usually routine. A few students may have statistics that appear to be conspiracy theory, which is a great segue into discussing how we know a website is telling the truth.

The "Beyond Vietnam" speech was a little difficult for my students because of its length. I found the best way to get into it was to examine 1-2 paragraphs at a time. However, this can become too slow and students may lose interest, so be careful. You can also just focus on page two, three and five in class and assign the rest of the speech for homework reading or delve into them in another class. These three pages introduce the idea of black and white boys fighting and dying together, yet not attending the same schools or living on the same street. They also introduce the concepts of conscientious objector and war crimes.

## Part Three: War as a Negative Good

### Materials Needed:

- Class set of Dr. King's [Question and Answer Period](#) at the end of the "Beyond Vietnam" speech delivered at Riverside Church, NY, on April 4, 1967.

**Activities/Instructions:** Each activity can be a classroom discussion, pair-share, or group activity, and can take from 5-20 minutes each.

1. Place students in groups and ask them to share with one another one question each on the Riverside speech that they came up with for homework. Ask students to discuss the questions and formulate the answers among themselves. Groups share out with the class.
2. Using their homework from the first day, have students examine increasing Vietnam War death toll rates in conjunction with the growing opposition to the war that they have already observed. This is a good place to make possible comparisons to the Iraq/Afghanistan wars. Groups share out with the class.
3. Read out the Question and Answer Period document out loud popcorn-style with your class. Have students write a one-paragraph statement examining Dr. King as a patriot, using evidence from this document as well the other speeches students have read.
4. Write the statement "war is a negative good" on the board. Ask students to agree or disagree with a show of hands. Have them write a one paragraph supporting statement, then share their views with the class. This activity can also be structured as a class debate.

### Notes from Bill's Classroom:

Students are beginning to burn out on speeches so be a little careful. They may need a little coaxing at this point. The "War as a Negative Good" discussion can become loud depending on the individual class' personality. Some classes will debate all day long.

## Part Four: Dissent and Patriotism

### Materials Needed:

- Class set of US Senate Case Study on Martin Luther King, Jr. (Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports on Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans. Book III. *Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate.* 23 April 1976. ) The entire transcript is available [online](#) but it is over 100 pages long so [here](#) is the condensed version compiled by Bill that contains the pages he found most objectionable and controversial.

### Activities/Instructions:

1. Do a quick review on Dr. King and what students have learned. Fill in more information in the KWL chart from the beginning of the unit.
2. Distribute Senate Intelligence handouts. Have note their questions in the margins as they read. Ask students to share out their questions and comments with the class; conduct a discussion.
3. Revisit the idea of dissent and patriotism. Have students evaluate Dr. King one last time by revisiting the essential question – “Can Dr. King be considered a patriot?” – using knowledge they have gained from this unit.

### Notes from Bill’s Classroom:

Students have better knowledge of Dr. King by now and are probably ready for a change from speeches. I use the Final Report of the Select Committee to study Governmental Operations by the US Senate to stir things up a bit. Some students might find the content offensive so be prepared. Students struggle with the idea that Dr. King may have had affairs, or that the government may have actively encouraged his suicide.

This lesson can be difficult to monitor. Some students became very upset at either Dr. King or the government. You may need to help them work through some strong emotions. They have always been glad that they read the material, but are often still upset. I usually revisit the meaning of non-violent protest and the need for an informed and active democracy. You can also discuss dissent as a force for good.