FROM IDENTIFICATION TO CONFRONTATION: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR’S “A TIME TO BREAK SILENCE” SPEECH

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Abstract:
Martin Luther King, Jr.’s success as a civil rights activist was based, to a significant extent, on his skills as an orator. By successfully identifying the civil rights cause with key symbols from American civil religion, such as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, as well as well-known religious homilies King was able to get a significant proportion of white American liberals to support his campaign for an end to segregation in the American South. After some indecision in the later years of his life, King decided to apply his skills as an activist and orator to opposing American involvement in the Vietnam War. His first major speech against the war was delivered at Riverside church in New York and was entitled ‘A time to break silence’. This paper will argue that in this speech King abandoned his traditional rhetorical strategy of identifying his program with key symbols acceptable to white liberals in favour of a more confrontational rhetorical style, that threatened, rather than acknowledged, the superiority of American values and institutions. Rather than basing his arguments for an end to American involvement in Vietnam on established authorities and homilies, such as the symbols of American civil religion, King’s appeals in ‘Time’ were based on the dictates of his own conscience and his claim, as a preacher, to speak on behalf of God. The paper will also show that contrary to the views expressed by Richard Lischer, King’s later speeches condemning American involvement in Vietnam responded to the criticism he had received for ‘A Time to break silence’ and more closely identified his opposition with authorities and homilies acceptable to a mainstream liberal audience.

Stream: Media Studies

In the eyes of the press and most of America, King emerged as a uniquely powerful leader. But how did this process occur? What made King a superstar? The answer to this question can be stated in a single word: language. (Miller 1992, p 10)

Much of the recent scholarship on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr has focused on the later period of his life when King’s growing radicalism led him to oppose American intervention in Vietnam as well as calling for a massive reorientation of government policy to alleviate poverty and end defacto segregation in American cities. Given this significant interest in the later period of King’s life, which has included the degree to which King’s later rhetoric varied from that which he had used in the earlier phase of his career, (See Lischer 1995, Sharman 1999a and 2001 and Sunnemark 2004), it is surprising that very little work has been done on the rhetorical strategies which King used in his most famous speech of this latter period, ‘A Time to break Silence’. It was in this speech, delivered on April 4 1967 exactly a year before
King was gunned down in Memphis, that he first expressed his opposition to American involvement in the Vietnam War in a setting, Riverside Church in New York, which guaranteed significant coverage by liberal media who had previously supported his Southern campaigns.\(^2\)

The noted African American scholar Vincent Harding has described the speech as ‘historic’ and ‘the most notable result’ of King’s decision to break with the Johnson Administration and pursue an agenda that challenged white liberal values at the same time as it threatened King’s status as an American hero. (See Harding 1996, pp 69-81) Similarly, Frederick Sunnermark in a recently published study on King’s language describes the speech as ‘central for any understanding of King’s position on the war issue’. (Sunnemark 2004, p 187)

In this paper I will seek to partly rectify the scholarly neglect of the rhetorical strategies that King adopted in his speech ‘A time to break silence’. I will also contrast the rhetorical strategies that King adopted in ‘Time’ with those he had used successfully in previous speeches in his career. I will argue that in many important respects ‘A Time to break silence’ represented a substantial break from the strategies that King had traditionally employed to win support from one of his primary constituencies - white liberals. In his earlier speeches King had sought to identify his demands with symbols from American civil religion as well as with the statements of writers, philosophers and other figures of authority within white liberal society. At the same time King had used homilies from well-known Christian sermons such as the parable of the Good Samaritan and the eventual triumph of good over evil to justify his arguments for black civil rights. (See King 1964, pp 16-24 and 58-66) In ‘Time’, however, King largely abandoned these more formal strategies in favour of a plea from conscience and honesty. By drawing on his authority as a clergyman, a civil rights leader, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and an American hero - his established ethos - King sought to persuade his audience that his statements about American involvement in Vietnam were correct and must be listened to. Apart from the authority of his own conscience, that had overcome his initial reluctance to speak against the war, the only significant authority, which King drew on in his speech to justify his opposition to the war, was the authority of God. King represented the authority of God, who as a clergyman he asserted he must speak for, as overriding all other authorities and justifying the strident criticism he made in the speech of American policy in Vietnam.

… I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men, the calling to be a son of the living vocation of sonship and brotherhood, and because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come tonight to speak for them. (Washington 1986, ‘A time to break silence’, p 234)

As well as seeking to account for the variation in King’s rhetorical strategies in ‘Time’ the paper will challenge the contention of Lischer (1995) and Sunnemark (2004) that King’s increased radicalism in the later part of his life led to a fundamental shift in his rhetorical strategies. The paper will demonstrate how as a \(^2\) I will discuss the background to King’s arrival at Riverside and has previous hesitant steps to oppose
result of the criticism ‘A Time to break Silence’ received from previously supportive liberal media and institutions King adjusted his later rhetoric. Though he did not recant his position on the war - the way he expressed it, particularly when addressing moderate white and black audiences, varied from the way he expressed his opposition in ‘Time’. In later speeches the old patterns of identification re-emerged as King sought to maintain his relevance as a leader among liberal whites and moderate blacks.

**Background to King’s speech**

King’s statements against American involvement in Vietnam, as he expressed them at Riverside church, had not been arrived at easily. These statements reflected King’s growing radicalisation, as well as that of the movement that he led, throughout the period of the 1950s and 60s. King began his career as a civil rights activist in Montgomery Alabama in 1955 when he was unexpectedly thrust into leadership of the Montgomery Bus boycott. By 1965, however, his standing as a national leader meant that it was inevitable that he would be required, and feel bound, to take a position on the issue of American involvement in the Vietnam War.

King’s expression of strong opposition to American involvement in Vietnam took time to develop and was influenced by the growing radicalisation of the civil rights movement as well as white liberal opinion in the second half of the 1960s. King first spoke against the war in speech at Howard University on March 1\(^{st}\) 1965. He continued to make occasional comments, of a relatively general nature, calling for peace and a negotiated settlement in Vietnam throughout the first part of 1965. By July, however, these comments had started to attract significant media attention. (See Garrow 1986a, pp 429-430) By September 1965 King had expanded his comments beyond just a call for peace to include more detailed criticism of American actions and a proposed letter writing campaign to all major leaders involved in the war urging them to enter negotiations to end the war. At this time a key ally of President Lyndon Johnson, Senator Thomas Dodd, spoke out strongly against King’s comments and questioned his competence to comment on something outside his area of expertise. (See Garrow 1986a, p 445) Following extensive consultation with his key advisors King, as a result of this criticism, decided to refrain in the foreseeable future from making comments against the war. This decision was based primarily on King’s concern that further comments would alienate him and the movement from the Johnson administration thus seriously compromising the progress of civil rights reform. This was particularly relevant given the fact that Johnson had supported the passage of the two major pieces of civil rights legislation, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the recently passed Voting Rights Act 1965.

King’s silence did not, however, come easily. Throughout 1966, as Garrow and King’s FBI File attest, (See Garrow 1986a and b) he became worried that he was allowing political expediency to get in the way of principle which, as a moral and religious leader in American society, he felt it particularly important to adhere. Johnson’s expansion of the war as well as the mounting evidence of the negative consequences of American actions added to King’s distress about his silence.\(^3\) At the

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\(^3\) Garrow notes, particularly, the impact of King’s reading of an article in the journal *Ramparts*. The
same time the criticism the war was receiving from other black groups such as SNCC (Student non-violent co-ordinating Committee) and CORE (Congress of racial equality), along with the fact that his political position among black youth was being challenged by the calls for Black Power also led King to question the wisdom, as well as the political validity, of his decision not to speak against the war.

The desire to assuage his conscience as well as reassert his reputation as a radical leader among black youth, as well as, to an extent, among liberal whites led to King to take a strong stand against the war in the early part of 1967. Although he had delivered speeches against the war before King was aware that his speech at Riverside Church, given its historic significance and setting in New York City, would inevitably attract more significant coverage than earlier addresses.

Before ‘Time’, in ‘Time’: King’s rhetorical strategies in his earlier speeches and in ‘A Time to break Silence’

Before considering King’s strategies in ‘Time’ I will briefly consider the primary rhetorical strategies he had previously used to win support from white Americans for an end to segregation in the American South.

King’s most famous speeches are littered with references from the sacred documents of American civil religion - the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence - as well as quotes of statements from famous and revered figures in American history such as Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. In addition, King quoted from literary and philosophical sources within the Western tradition; names such as Thoreau, Whitman, Hugo, Plato and Aristotle are used extensively to justify his arguments for civil rights and equality for black Americans.

In his most famous civil addresses such as ‘I have dream’ King used the authority of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to argue deductively that America must grant equal rights for its black citizens. In this and other speeches King sought to identify black civil rights with the promise contained in these documents.

So I say to you my friends that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. (‘I have a dream’ Washington 1986, p 219)

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4 In certain white liberal quarters King’s failure to speak against the war had been questioned. The influential journal of liberal Christian thinking, Christian Century, had in 1966, for example, questioned King’s claims to be a moral leader as a result of his failure to speak out against the war. (See Garrow 1986a, p 469)

5 King would generally acknowledge the source of his quotation as a means of adding authority to his message among white liberal audiences though on occasions, where the quote was well known, he would embed the phrase in the text thus giving the impression that the authority as well as King were speaking on behalf of civil rights. Keith Miller calls this technique voice merging and notes it as a
King did not, however, to any significant degree, use American ideals or other sources which would be authoritative to the predominantly white audience he was addressing at the church or through the media coverage of the speech to justify his opposition to the Vietnam War in ‘A time to break silence’. In fact his use of authorities from all sources, including familiar Christian homilies, is as limited as in any of his speeches. The only quotation from a named authority of American civil religion is the quote from the late President Kennedy justifying the need for the United States to create the economic and social conditions that would ensure peaceful change in the Third World rather than seeking to hold that change back through military intervention. This quote is used towards the end of the speech along with a quote from an unidentified ‘American official’ as evidence that the United States was on the wrong side of the world revolution. (See Washington 1986, ‘A Time to break silence’, p 240) The placement of these quotes towards the end of the speech after King had already made a litany of criticisms of United States policy in Vietnam, not justified by such authority, significantly reduced the impact of the quotations.

If King did not use his traditional rhetorical strategies of identifying his claims for an end to the Vietnam War with the symbols of American civil religion and familiar religious homilies what strategies did he employ in ‘Time’ to support his claim for an end to American involvement in the war? Unlike previous speeches where the dictates of conscience were subordinate to the authority of key symbols in ‘Time’ King’s primary rhetorical strategy is to justify his desire to speak based on the need to be true to himself and the primary authority he claimed to serve - God. The entire first section of the speech is devoted to King’s justification for speaking out against the war all of which is based on the requirements of conscience and the need to represent the will of God. The opening statement leaves us in no doubt as to the motives for King’s speech.

I come to this magnificent house of worship tonight because my conscience leaves me no choice… The recent statement of your executive committee are the sentiments of my own heart and I found myself in full accord when I read its opening lines: “A time comes when silence is betrayal.” That time has come for us in relation to Vietnam. (Washington 1986, ‘A time to break Silence’, p 231)

As well as justifying his opposition to the war as being based on conscience, rather than authority, rhetorically King highlighted the difficulties and his reluctance to speak out and thus emphasised the truth of his statements against the war. The title of the speech, the reference in the above quote to silence being betrayal, his description of his statements as ‘a vocation of agony’, (Washington 1986, ‘Time’, p 231) as well as his description of his own two year battle to ‘break the betrayal of my own silences’, (Washington 1986, ‘Time’, p 232) all emphasised the extent to which King sought to represent himself as a reluctant critic of American involvement in the war.  

As well as representing his claims to speak against the war as being reluctantly based on the dictates of his own conscience King also represented his right, as well as the authority of his opposition in ‘Time’, as based on his role as a representative of God. As he did to a greater extent in the later part of his career, as Richard Lischer notes

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6 The executive committee to which King is referring here is that of the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam a prominent, largely white church group who were opposing American involvement in
(see Lischer 1995, 158-160), in ‘Time’ King invoked the authority of God and his role as his representative to justify his criticism of American society. In many of his speeches he used Christian homilies to justify his claims for civil rights. The homily of the death of evil upon the seashore from Exodus is, for example, used by King to show that good will eventually triumph over evil. (See King 1963, pp 58-59 and 62)

In ‘Time’, however, Christian homilies are barely invoked; instead King used the authority of God to justify his defence of the weak and powerless against attacks by American power. King used his own voice, speaking on behalf of God; to challenge America to rid itself of the evil that was poisoning its soul as represented by its involvement in Vietnam.

To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war… Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them? (Washington 1986, ‘A Time to break silence’, p 234)

This claim, supported by the quote above, that God, and the dictates of his own conscience in representing God, represented a higher authority than National interest and American values was one which in itself challenged the authority of the values which King had been so keen to affirm in many of his earlier speeches. In this speech the highest authority is no longer the sacred documents of America it is the word of God that King is representing.

Having established the authority of his words in terms of speaking on behalf of God in representing the voices of the powerless as well as expressing the demands of his conscience King in the second section of ‘Time’ went on to outline the litany of ‘charges’ against America in its handling of the War in Vietnam. King’s comments in the second part of his speech represent an unprecedented attack, in terms of the language used, on American actions and one that could only be designed to generate hostility and defensiveness among American policy makers. King’s language here, as in much of the speech, is totally at odds with his traditional strategy of criticising in general terms the failures of American society to make good its ideals at the same time as affirming the positive quality of these ideals. Rather than seeking to persuade his audience by highlighting the good that they aspire to and affirming the greatness of their institutions and values through the quotation from familiar authorities, in ‘Time’ King sought to demonstrate the brutal reality of American actions in Vietnam. In so doing he sought to get Americans to face the consequences of their actions in Vietnam.


7 As King states it in the speech: ‘Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.’ (Washington 1986, ‘A Time to break silence’, p 234)
fascist character of American policy, thus undermining his previously stated faith in American institutions, King then, on three separate occasions, identified American actions with the worst excesses of the Nazi regime – the concentration camps. Seemingly innocent Vietnamese were represented by King as dispossessed of their land and herded ‘into concentration camps’. Not only that but as the Nazis tested their latest medicines and tortures on the victims of the concentration camp so America is represented by King as testing its latest weapons on innocent peasants in Vietnam.

What do they [the peasants] think as we test out our latest weapons on them, just as the Germans tested out new medicines and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe. (Washington 1986, A Time to break Silence’, p 236)

The concentration camp analogy is repeated two paragraphs later to demonstrate the inhumanity of American actions in Vietnam. King to my knowledge never repeated these metaphors in a speech to be heard by a white audience either through the media or in person.

Further evidence of the emotive and highly critical tone that King used in ‘Time’ to describe American actions in Vietnam is provided by his depiction of the sexual slavery into which families, including children, were forced to sell their women as a result of the economic destruction which the Americans had wrought in Vietnam:

They [the peasants] see the children degraded by our soldiers as they beg for food. They see the children selling their sisters to our soldiers, soliciting for their mothers. (See Washington 1986, ‘A Time to break silence’, p 236)

King, like the concentration camp analogy, repeats this image of women being forced into sexual slavery in the speech thus adding force and emphasis to his message about the evil of American actions in Vietnam.

King’s repeated use of these images in ‘A time to break silence’ clearly illustrated his desire to shock and disturb the American public, particularly his primary audience for this speech - white liberals. Maybe in order to have his opinions rise above the myriad of voices that opposed the war in Vietnam or maybe to alert Americans to the seriousness and urgency of his calls King’s rhetorical strategies in ‘A Time to break silence’ departed from those of earlier speeches. Rather than seeking to cajole Americans with acceptable and authoritative images from their national life King instead confronted America with the reality of the nation’s actions in Vietnam and challenged the country to undergo a revolution of values.

Needless to say King’s use of the ‘concentration camp’ analogy and other strident language to criticise American involvement in Vietnam did not go unnoticed by the national media. The two main liberal newspaper outlets the New York Times and the Washington Post highlighted King’s use of the concentration camp metaphor in their stories covering his speech. They also used the analogy in their critical editorials as evidence of the lack of balance and understanding that King had of the situation in Vietnam. (See Robinson 1967, p 1 and editorials in Washington Post 1967 and New York Times 1967)
One of the other key characteristics of the rhetorical strategy used by King in ‘Time’, which differed from that which he adopted in other major speeches, was his willingness to focus on specific details in terms of his criticism of American actions. At the same time he also, uncharacteristically, outlined specific policy initiatives that he regarded as appropriate in bringing the war to an end. At the same time he also, uncharacteristically, outlined specific policy initiatives that he regarded as appropriate in bringing the war to an end.

In the second section of the speech King gave a detailed description of the failure of American policy in Vietnam. King described the failure and futility of American support for the French against the nationalists under Ho and the misjudgement by the United States of the Vietnamese relationship with China that led to the false assumption that they were strongly influenced by communism. He also made an unsubstantiated claim that ‘less than twenty-five percent’ of the membership of the Vietcong were communists. At the same time King also presented five policy solutions, including ending all bombing in North and South Vietnam and setting a date for the removal of all foreign troops from Vietnam. (See Washington 1986, ‘A Time to break silence’, p 239)

King’s decision to provide detailed criticisms of American actions and spell out policy initiatives may have been rhetorically designed to present his views as more authoritative through demonstration that he had detailed knowledge of the situation in Vietnam. This may have been in King’s mind given that he was best known as a civil rights leader. If that was his intention, however, it seriously backfired as much of the criticism that he received for the speech, apart from the language that he used as I described above, was for the specific policies and criticisms. Charges that King was out of his depth and did not have a detailed knowledge of foreign policy were common in the liberal press. (See *New York Times* 1967 and *Washington Post* 1967)

**After ‘Time’; the readjustment of King’s rhetorical strategies**

King’s use of threatening images and his failure to make significant use of relevant authorities in his ‘A time to break silence’ speech contrasted with the rhetorical strategies which he was to use in later speeches on Vietnam when addressing liberal white and moderate black audiences. In later speeches, following the criticism that he received over his ‘A Time to break silence’ speech, King added authority to his claims to speak based on the requirements of conscience. In these speeches he identified his criticisms of American involvement in Vietnam with other prominent Americans who had dissented against the actions of the Federal Government in times of war. At the urging of his principal advisor, Stanley Levison, King, in his later speeches, identified his opposition to the Vietnam War with Congressional doves George McGovern and William Fulbright. (See Garrow 1986b, File reference 100-111180-9-1282) At the same time he also identified his anti-war stance with past heroes who had opposed unjust American wars. The following quote from a later speech to a labour audience shows both how out of character the rhetoric King used in

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8 As Levison stated in a separate conversation in relation to the appropriate way King should express his anti-war stance. ‘[He] has got to get into a position where an attack on King becomes an attack on a lot of powerful people and not an attack on an easy marker’ (See Garrow 1986b, File reference 100-111180-9-1272a). Clearly King’s use of a rhetorical strategy justifying his attack on American policy
his ‘Time’ speech was, in terms of its failure to identify opposition to the war with established authorities, as well as how King adapted his rhetoric following the criticism he received in relation to his ‘Time’ speech. The speech was delivered on 11 Nov, 1967 and entitled ‘The domestic impact of the war in Vietnam’. In justifying the validity of opposing his country in times of war King, in the speech, drew on the precedents of revered and respected figures in American history who had opposed the Mexican American war.

During the Mexican war the intellectual elite of the nation, Emerson, Thoreau, and many others were withering critics of national policy. In the Congress a relatively unknown first term congressman made a scathing address on the floor denouncing the war. The young Congressman was Abraham Lincoln of Illinois. At the same time a young army Lieutenant almost decided to resign his commission to protest the war. His name was Ulysses Grant. (King 1967a, p 8)

In his last speech to a predominantly white audience at the National Cathedral in Washington four days before he died King again reverted to his traditional strategy of identifying his opposition to the Vietnam War with symbols and homilies familiar to his audience. In this speech King used the famous Washington Irving story Rip Van Winkle as the initial homily, around which his speech was based, to justify that America must get on the right side of the world revolution – this included supporting the rights of previously colonised nations to self-determination as, King believed, was occurring in Vietnam. Although not part of America’s sacred documents the story was used by King to show how Rip, by being asleep for twenty years, had missed out on a legitimate revolution: that which had led to the birth of the American republic and the appointment of George Washington as its first President. This story clearly alluded to the sacred heritage with which a majority of white Americans identified.

When Rip Van Winkle went up into the mountain, the sign had a picture of King George the Third of England. When he came down twenty years later the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first President of the United States… And this reveals to us the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that Rip slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution… There can be no gainsaying of the fact that a great revolution is taking place in the world today… (Washington 1986, ‘Remaining Awake through a great revolution’, p 268)

In ‘Remaining Awake’, to follow on from his use of the Rip Van Winkle homily, King introduced the section of the speech criticising American involvement in Vietnam with a quote from the revered American, President Kennedy, stating that ‘Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind’. (See Washington 1986, ‘Remaining Awake through a great revolution’, pp 275 and 276) This quote is repeated at the end of the section of the speech on Vietnam and is used, along with the earlier homily, to justify King’s opposition to the war in terms of established authorities within liberal society. By using this quote King also represented his opposition to the war as being based as much on a pacifist desire to save mankind as on a specific opposition to America actions.

**Why did he do it?: An explanation of King’s rhetorical strategies in ‘A Time to break Silence’**
What explanations then can be provided for King’s use of the more radical rhetoric in ‘A Time to break silence’? The first explanation is provided by the extent of King’s increased radicalism that, prior to it being tempered by the dictates of public opinion, was given its first full expression in ‘Time’. By 1967 King had become increasingly disillusioned by the conduct of American domestic and foreign policy particularly the Johnson administrations’ failure to make good its promises to end poverty at home whilst it instead pursued, what King regarded as, an unjust war abroad. This increased frustration with American policy (See Garrow 1986b, File reference 100-111180-9-1268a, King to Levison) combined with King’s own reluctantly self-imposed silence on the war caused him a significant amount of pain as well as forcing him to question whether he was truly fulfilling the role that he felt bound to play as a moral leader in American society. The pain of his silence in relation to the war was added to by the criticisms that he received from the growing chorus of radical black activists, representing such groups as SNCC and CORE who by 1967 had actively opposed American involvement in Vietnam.

King’s speech at Riverside must then be viewed in terms of this growing radicalism that had not, in relation to the issue of Vietnam, been able to find a voice prior to this time. In the last year of his life this radicalism, in terms of King’s rhetoric, was tempered by the criticism that he received for ‘Time’ as well as the advice of Stanley Levison and others who sought to ensure that the representation of King’s comments on Vietnam did not isolate him too much from mainstream American opinion. (See for example discussions between Levison and King recorded in Garrow 1986b, File reference 100-111180-9-1517a) As I have argued elsewhere, (See Sharman 1999a and 2001) King’s desire to maintain a bridge between the more moderate and radical positions in American society led him to temper the way he presented his views in the later part of his life, particularly when addressing moderate audiences. Given the situation in April 1967, however, it was not surprising that when King did finally break his silence on Vietnam he did so in a way that sought to reassert his credentials as a moral leader at the same time as it dispensed with his traditional rhetorical strategies.

Added to these points are two additional factors. Firstly, King was probably overly optimistic about the reception he would get from groups, including white liberals, who had previously supported his civil rights campaigns and by 1967 were turning against American involvement in Vietnam. King may have underestimated the extent to which despite his success he was still a black man in a country with a long history of racism. A big part of King’s success as a civil rights leader was, as I have argued, due to his willingness to cajole, rather than threaten white liberals to support his civil right agenda. Faced with strident criticism from someone who they had strongly supported many whites may have felt that King was not suitably grateful for the support, as a black man, which had been provided to him by the white establishment. It is likely that King underestimated the extent of this reaction.9

As noted earlier in the paper, King’s radical statements and strategies are also likely to have been partly due to the desire to have his voice heard above the clamour of

9 For the genesis of this idea I am indebted to a conversation with the well-known African American
those opposing the war in 1967. King was, despite the strength and influence of his moral convictions, nevertheless a political leader. Like all political leaders it was important to him that his voice was heard, primarily as a means of advancing the cause he advocated, in this case an end to American involvement in Vietnam, but as a subsidiary reason from the perspective of his own ego and the desire to maintain his position as a political leader in American society in the late 1960s.10

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that King’s rhetorical strategies in the speech ‘A time to break silence’ differed markedly from those that he used in previous speeches as a political activist. Instead of identifying his claims for an end to American involvement in the Vietnam War with accepted symbols and homilies from American civil religion and the Christian pulpit King’s speech dispensed with authorities in favour of an appeal based on conscience and a claim to speak directly on behalf of God. At the same time I have argued that King’s rhetorical strategies in ‘Time’ did not, as has been suggested by Lischer (1995) and Sunnemark (2004), represent a permanent break from the strategies that he had employed in earlier speeches. I have instead demonstrated that in his later speeches against the American presence in Vietnam King, as the result of criticism from liberal authorities and media, reverted to strategies more closely in line with those that had served him well in his earlier speeches. In so doing King sought to retain his position as a moderate leader, one who represented the interests of liberal whites and middle-class blacks, rather than a radical activist identified with the burgeoning New Left in American society.

Bibliography


10 Evidence of King’s personal concern when his position as a leader was threatened can be gleaned from his comments to Stanley Levison, recorded by the FBI, following the violence that occurred at a civil rights demonstration in Memphis shortly before he died. ‘All I’m saying is that Roy Wilkins, the Bayard Rustin [sic] and that stripe… and the Negroes that are influenced by what they read in the newspapers… [will say] I’m right Martin Luther King is dead, he’s finished, his non-violence is nothing no one is listening to it. Let’s face it we have great public relations setback where my image and my leadership are concerned’ (Garrow 1986b, File reference 100-1111809-1624a King to


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