*January 16, 2023: The German Women's Network for Peace organized a discussion on the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday in the U.S. "US-American activist Anna Gyorgy gave some thoughts on democracy in the U.S. today and struggles against what Dr. King named “the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism.”*

*Here is the English version of the opening presentation given in German, which was followed by a lively discussion.*

It is an honor to meet with you today, to talk about the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and to hear your comments and thoughts on the urgent matters that face us all.

This is the official American holiday honoring his birth on January 15, 1929. Today he would be 94 years old. Yet he was killed by an assassin's bullet when only 39.

Here's a brief identification of this great leader, from the online Wikipedia:

"Martin Luther King Jr. was an American Baptist minister and activist, one of the most prominent leaders in the civil rights movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968. An African American church leader and son of early civil rights activist and minister Martin Luther King Sr., King advanced civil rights for people of color in the United States through nonviolence and civil disobedience."

He accomplished and put in motion so much during his brief 39 years on earth. He inspired millions through his brilliant speeches and nonviolent civil disobedience actions in the Gandhian tradition. He believed in the creation of what he called "the beloved community."

Quoting from an essay about this:

"Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke often of beloved community as a way of transforming people and relationships and creating communities grounded in reconciliation, friendship and human dignity. Key principles include nonviolence as powerful expressions of courage, understanding, trust and love.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Although he is the most recognized leader of the civil rights era, many dedicated activists were involved in this dynamic and often dangerous movement. It revealed both the depths of racism in the United States and set in motion some basic changes through civil and voting rights legislation.

Today the celebration of his birth anniversary refers often to his famous "I have a dream" speech, given before 250,000 people gathered in Washington in August 1963. There he described his dream of black children and white children being judged by their character rather than the color of their skin.

But his message went far beyond the call for equality among races and extended to struggles for economic and political justice.

It has been said that Dr. King sealed his death warrant on April 4, 1967, in his speech *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*, given at the Riverside Church in New York City. He was killed exactly one year later.

In a long and detailed speech, he came out publicly against the war in Vietnam. And beyond analyzing that war, and disputing America's role in it, taking over from the French colonialists, he went on to critique American government and society.

For this, he was heavily criticized in the mainstream press for 'leaving' the civil rights struggle he was known for, and directly taking on the military machine and politics of the United States.

Here are just a few key quotes from this speech, which is available online and well worth reading or viewing:[[2]](#footnote-2)

**"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, 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." ...**

**and further:**

**"When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."...**

**and then:**

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

Now in the US, 57 years later, there have been many wars, killing and maiming millions, destroying historic cultures and lands abroad, while creating huge financial deficits that have prevented investment in basic infrastructure, education, public transportation, housing and more. Military budgets continue to increase, as has dedication to militarism and world hegemony.

A few examples: the US has at least 800 military bases around the world; has enabled the war in Yemen to continue through delivery of weapons and logistics; and has provoked China through recent political trips and military aid to Taiwan.

Meanwhile our bridges collapse, towns and cities are left devastated by the loss of jobs as factories closed and imports increase.. Recent infrastructure legislation, opposed by the cultish Republicans -- but that is another story -- may finally help to some extent

As Patricia Hynes, from our local Traprock Center for Peace and Justice in western Massachusetts wrote recently of the war in Ukraine -- in a letter to Present Biden, who was a youthful schoolmate of hers:

*"You have sustained the war in Ukraine since February 2022 by massively arming Ukraine with $54 billion in weapons and aid...*

*This war has become your war, despite the majority of Americans wanting a quick diplomatic end to it. And you risk — in not pursuing negotiations — nuclear war, recession, inflation and food shortages for millions in Africa and Asia, while the country Ukraine is being wrecked by Russian bombing.*

*All to bring down Putin, as you said in an unguarded moment.*

*Isn’t regime change a haplessly failed habit of the U.S. government?"[[3]](#footnote-3)*  
 **Now what about racism and materialism?**

The United States, and the world, got a major shock, wakeup call and revelation through the torturous police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25, 2020.

That death followed many similar vicious deaths of black men at the hands of the police, and some women too, such as Breonna Taylor, the 26 year old woman fatally shot in her own apartment during an unannounced police raid in 2020.

Opposition to the many deaths led to demonstrations and a strong Black Lives Matter movement, which unlike the civil rights movement of the King era is decentralized, with many groups in cities across the county and international connections.

Soul-searching and citizen challenges to the depth and history of racism in the US began in many areas: the media was challenged to increase reporters of color and news from and about communities of color. Historical discrimination against African Americans and other people of color was researched and exposed: in banking and housing, education, and the so-called justice system. With 5 percent of the world population, the US has the highest numbers of people in prison, 22% of those worldwide. And so many are people of color.

Environmental groups examined their own histories of racial discrimination. One of these was the long-established Sierra Club. It was good to learn that its new head is Ben Jealous, former head of the oldest civil rights organization, the NAACP.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Native American ("Indian") rights got more attention too, as major non-violent demonstrations blocked and opposed oil pipelines through their territories.

In many communities of color there were major efforts to register and encourage people to vote. This work is especially important now, as after the Supreme Court weakened the historic Voting Rights Act of King's era in 2013, states especially in the south have instituted laws and regulations making voting harder in poor and communities of color. [[5]](#footnote-5)

For the US is a multi-racial society, although major bastions of control continue to be dominated by white men. And the economy as well.

The extent of income inequality in the US is well-known here, I'm sure. The Occupy movements around 2010 focused on the 1% versus the 99%, exposing the huge wealth gaps. In the Covid era these have only gotten worse.

Happily, although you wouldn't know it from the mainstream media, people are organizing on many fronts for justice: in the courts, at the southern border opposing harsh actions against people seeking entry into the country as asylum seekers or migrants, and by forming unions challenging large corporations like Amazon, Starbucks and more.

And there is a growing environmental justice movement.

With the climate crisis now being felt in some way everywhere, there is more awareness that those most affected are the poor, communities of color and, as worldwide, those who have contributed the least to causing the problem of global warming and severe pollution.

Now I want to mention a few groups that are working in these areas:

One, fully in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr., is The Poor People's Campaign.

Here is their email message yesterday:

"This Martin Luther King Day, we must continue a campaign for social, political and economic rights, not simply to commemorate a man. This nation needs a different kind of Martin Luther King Day. More than a day, we are and have been, building a moral fusion movement. We need a movement led by poor and low-wage workers pushing for a Third Reconstruction and declaring that we don’t want some of our justice, we want all of our justice...

This moral fusion movement is on the move! This weekend, state campaigns from coast to coast are taking action and shaking the very chains of the interlocking injustices of systemic racism, militarism, poverty, ecological devastation, and the false moral narrative of religious nationalism. The actions below serve as just a few examples of our work. It is important to reiterate this because we have built, and will continue, to build a movement, not just a moment."[[6]](#footnote-6)

This kind of multi-issue movement, led by people of conscience and color, gives us hope for the future.

I have not specifically addressed the issue of democracy, but we can talk about that.

For now I want to close with a quote from that same "Beyond Vietnam" speech by Dr. King in 1967. As a climate and peace activist, it has always meant a lot to me -- as a challenge, and a warning:

**"We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. The "tide in the affairs of men" does not remain at the flood; it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: "Too late."** …We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation."

1. # "Remembering Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Beloved Community," Dionardo Pizana, [Michigan State University Extension](https://www.canr.msu.edu/outreach) - March 19, 2018 <https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/remembering_dr._martin_luther_king_jr.s_beloved_community>

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. # Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence Martin Luther King, Jr.  4 April 1967. <https://www.worldfuturefund.org/Reports2013/Martinlutherkingspeech1967.html> Full text of speech with link to video

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Letter to President Joe Biden, Greenfield Recorder, December 5, 2022  
   <https://www.traprock.org/letter-to-president-joe-biden/>  
    [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Jealous> "Benjamin Todd Jealous (born January 18, 1973) is an American civil rights leader and social impact investor. He served as the president and chief executive officer of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ([NAACP](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NAACP)) from 2008 to 2013." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ## [Shelby County v. Holder: Supreme Court Case, Arguments, Impact - ThoughtCo](https://www.thoughtco.com/shelby-county-v-holder-4685954) In Shelby County v. Holder (2013), a landmark case, the Supreme Court struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which provided the federal government with a formula to determine which voting jurisdictions should be subject to oversight when passing electoral laws. Fast Facts: Shelby County v. Holder Case Argued: February 27, 2013. <https://www.thoughtco.com/shelby-county-v-holder-4685954>

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/> for more information [↑](#footnote-ref-6)