

CHALLENGES TO THE MOVEMENT

INTERVIEW THREAD ONE: MILITARISM AND THE FBI

MARY LOU FINLEY

“Well, I remember that there was a Vietnam War teach-in at Stanford [University] in May of 1965, which was right before I graduated and right before I came to Chicago. So that was the beginning. It was during the early years of the teach-in movement when people were -- college students in particular were saying, ‘We need to understand this. What’s going on?’ So that gives you a little sense of the historical moment that we were in as all the Chicago Movement was taking shape. And it was... so the anti-war movement -- coming out of students in particular, the anti-war movement was starting by the summer of ‘65, so that was just beginning.

“So, during the year that I was here and worked with Martin Luther King, the staff for instance, were very strongly opposed to the war and were trying to get Doctor King to speak out against it. And I know that he had in some modest ways before that, but we were trying to encourage him. Many of the staff who were -- and the people who were close to him and had worked with him in the South more than somebody like me, but there was a strong feeling that we needed to oppose the Vietnam War.

“In the midst of all of that, [Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist] Thich Nhat Hanh showed up in Chicago. It was like in May of 1966. We’re in the middle of getting ready for doing the tenant unions, getting ready for the summer open housing campaign. And he came to see Doctor King because he wanted to talk to him about the issues in Vietnam, in the Vietnam War. I thought it was a very touching moment. I remember him walking down the street, in some street on the west side of Chicago. I never spoke with him, but I remember his presence there at that time. And I know that Doctor King was already thinking about the Vietnam War issue before he met with Thich Nhat Hanh. But that it was a very touching moment that this Vietnamese priest and peace activist wanted to connect with Martin Luther King, even in the midst of the Chicago confusion of all these other kind of activist things that were happening to call his attention to the Vietnam War issue.”

RICHARD FERNANDEZ

“And the MOBE [Mobilization Against the War] would be -- what was called the New York Avenue, Fifth Avenue Peace Parade Committee was organizing a big, big protest at the United Nations in April of 1967. And they invited Doctor King to come. And he had never come out quite loud and clear about the war. He had mentioned it a few times in a couple of places, and he wanted to consider it. And in order to do that with his some of his staff, he came to New York and met with a group of about 20 people. I was not in that circle, but a number of them were donors, people who had backed SCLC, some leaders from the anti-war movement, including Doctor Benjamin Spock. And the question was should he go down to this event. [Civil rights and peace activist] Bayard Rustin argued that there were two reasons not to go to that event. The first is you don’t want to mix the Civil Rights Movement with the anti-war movement. It will not be good for either. The second reason, according to Rustin and others in the room, was that on the letterhead of this organizing group was the name of Arnold Johnson, who was a member of the Communist Party and it said that right on the letterhead. Now, I happened to know Arnold Johnson personally. He didn’t have enough assertiveness to teach a Sunday school class. He was a lovely person. He had gone to Union Seminary, but they were afraid that the Communist thing would stick to King. And as many people know, there were those around the country who were trying to always associate him with the Communist Party, and they alleged this, that, and the other thing during his lifetime.

“So, King took all of this in, and he went back to Atlanta, had more discussions with staff, and decided about 15 days later he was going to speak at that event.”

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CLARENCE JONES

"What I knew, and Stanley Levison knew, but others did not know in that meeting, is that sometime before he made a decision to speak out he had received a cable, an invitation by cable sent to Paris, from a North Vietnam --a peace group in North Vietnam, offering to meet him in Paris to discuss how there might be a way of ending the Vietnam War. He felt that after having received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 that he had a different, special obligation, rising above his so-called stature as a civil rights leader. And I said categorically, 'You cannot go.'

" 'What do you mean I can't go?' I said, 'That would be the worst possible thing you can do at this time.' [Unclear] I said, 'You know, the FBI and the government will use it against you.' He said, 'Well, they don't know anything about it.' I said, 'Excuse me, Martin,' I said, 'You can believe within 10 minutes of that cable being transmitted from North Vietnam there's a copy on a CIA desk at Langley [Virginia, at CIA headquarters], and that they've had it for as long as you've had it. And you don't need to go down that direction at this time.'

"So, we had that discussion, discussions back and forth. And since I was equivocal, but mostly seemed to be opposed, he says, 'Well, since you feel this way, Clarence, why don't you try drafting something.' So, I did try doing an initial draft. Now, my draft started out by just reciting dispassionately, objectively, clinically, just what the facts were about the war in Vietnam and the state of the failed peace negotiations at that time, about a two-paragraph summary, or something. And then I would go and I'd write something I thought was very passionate about why there should be an effort to find a negotiated solution, an end to the war. But then I would say, but on the other hand, and then I would write another equally balanced passage that would counterbalance what I had said before, and that's the way I went back and forth the whole letter. Say one thing, but then I would say, I was giving deference to both sides. Doctor King gets a copy of the speech, and he calls me up, and he said, 'Clarence, I thought you were my radical.' I said, 'What do you mean?' He says, 'I don't get this. On the one hand, and on the other hand. You, above all people, should know that the Vietnam War is either morally right or morally wrong. And I'm a minister of the Gospel. I don't segregate my morals, I don't segregate my moral principles. What is this 'morally right?'' He said, 'You know, I love you, this is, you know, I can't use this, but I'm surprised you even wrote this. . . .' He said, 'I can't use this. I'm going to have to consult with my brother Vincent. Vincent Harding, you know Vincent.' At that time, he lived about four blocks from him in Atlanta. He said, 'We got to, I got to write something because I've gotta make a statement on this. I want to go to New York.'

"And so, at the end of the day the so-called time to break the silence, the speech that he gave on April 4th, 1967, to the committee of certain laymen and clergyman in the Riverside Church publicly opposing the war in Vietnam, was written by him and Vincent Harding. Martin acknowledges the writing. The thoughts and contents were both of them, but a lot of the writing was done by Vincent. So, I get their letter that they had jointly written, and I read it, and I call them up, and reflecting my earlier teachings by Catholic nuns about English grammar, using old fashioned phrases like the topic sentence, I said, 'Now, I don't know, in the topic sentence of the 20th paragraph, are you sure you want to say this?' 'Well, what do you mean?' I said, 'You have a sentence that begins and says, 'The United States today is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world, period.' ' I said, 'Do you want to say that, first of all, and if you want to say it, do you want to start that as the first sentence of your paragraph?' 'Well, it's true,' blah, blah, blah.

"Anyway, in the final version of the speech what they did is they kept the sentence in, but they didn't make it the first sentence of the paragraph they embedded it in the paragraph. It was an extraordinary speech. But that speech, and the reaction to it, maybe when he gave is so-called "I Have a Dream" speech April 28th, 1963, using current parlance, maybe his approval rating was like 60 to 70 percent. I can assure you at the time he gave this speech on April 4th, 1968, five years later, his approval ratings were probably only 30 percent, at most, in the country. And what really hurt him and hurt me and angered me is that all of these people who have said he was the greatest civil rights leader of all time, and extolled him for his great civil rights leadership, then turned on him. And then what really hurt him, initially, then he got over it, was when you would have people like Roy Wilkins, president of the NAACP, and Whitney Young, president of the Urban League and all of these -- and some newspaper -- Negro newspaper publishers, and presidents of Negro colleges and universities coming out and criticizing him, all prompted, of course, by Lyndon Johnson, he was attacked viciously."

CLEVELAND SELLERS

"Yeah, it was -- it was-it was not the precursor to Riverside [Church, in New York City], it was the first release of that statement in, in Ebenezer [Baptist Church in Atlanta] . . . But Doctor King called Stokely [Carmichael] and said, 'I want you to come to church,' and Stokely said, 'When?' He said, 'It's Sunday.' He said, 'I have a speech I'm going to make and I want you to hear it.' And Stokely said, 'Doctor King, you know, I'm a heathen so I, I'm not going to be up...' He said, 'Come to church.' And I said -- and he said, 'Okay, well, I'll come, I'll put on my Sunday go-to-meeting suit and I'll come on over there to your church.' And he -- then after he hung up with Doctor King, he called me.

"Stokely called me and said, 'We have to go to church on Sunday, Doctor King is going to make a speech that we need to -- we need to hear.' And -- a sermon, he said it was a sermon, a special sermon, and so we got up and we went over and we got there and we -- Stokely had promised we were going to be on the first row. We couldn't make it to the first row, that was too early, but we got on the second row and Doctor King started talking about his position against the war in Vietnam. And when it was over, we both stood up and cheered, Stokely and I, and then eventually the rest of the church got up and cheered, but that was -- that was just sweet to my heart because I had been a resister, an anti-war resister before and had actually refused induction into the military service. And during that time, I was refusing induction, I talked to Doctor King about being a conscientious objector and how to stand on faith and principles and those kinds of things and he talked to me all the time. "

CLEVELAND SELLERS

"We had a responsibility to move Doctor King as far to the left as you possibly could. And so, when we had an opportunity to talk to him about the war in Vietnam and about Black Power, we encouraged him to understand what we were saying and to support those efforts, and so we did stress that he needed to take a position against the war, the war in Vietnam. That was, that was mission number one at the start of it, you know, to get Doctor King to kind of keep moving further and further to the left, and to recognize we had seen that people in Alabama who couldn't vote, and people in Alabama that was getting killed and Mississippi for trying to register to vote and all those were getting killed and all that because they didn't want -- they didn't want them to vote, they didn't want them to have power, they didn't want them to make independent decisions, and that we needed to keep educating people on those factors, to people who would listen and understand and move on that and take those kinds of actions. We wanted to, to, to have the community with the resources, the skills, and the power to make decisions about their lives as, as much as they could and continue to develop strategies way be -- you know, way after we had been in there organizing the first time around and had left. That was our -- that was our goal and that was our mission, to train people who could have those skills, those organizing skills and talents to get people going."

