

Martin Luther King Jr. Day - Talking peace - Speaker: Parallels exist between Vietnam, Iraq

By JOE MIZER, T-R Staff Writer

Martin Luther King Jr.'s doctrine of promoting change through nonviolent resistance is as significant today as it was 40 years ago. And King's words spoken against the Vietnam War – in a speech given April 4, 1967 – are relevant to today's war in Iraq.

That was the gist of a 30-minute presentation Monday night by Greg Coleridge, keynote speaker at the Tuscarawas County celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day in Dover.

The 47-year-old Akronite is economic justice director of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker-related social action organization that educates, advocates and organizes for peace and social and economic justice.

Speaking before a crowd of some 150 in First Baptist Church, Coleridge said that while King is most widely known and deservedly praised for his "I Have A Dream" speech, it represents only a portion of his creeds and deeds.

"As stirring as the 'I Have A Dream' speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial (in Washington, D.C.) was, it may not have been his most important, his most disturbing to the status quo or his most challenging to those who looked to him for guidance or inspiration," Coleridge said.

Among King's hundreds of talks, sermons and lectures, Coleridge said, there are two that are often forgotten and buried "that are eerily prophetic and profoundly relevant to us today."

The first was his remarks at a ceremony after his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, in 1964 – a year after the "I Have A Dream" speech.

"Sooner or later," Coleridge quoted King, "all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood." For that to be achieved, "we must evolve, for all human conflict, a method that rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation."

Coleridge said King's foundation for such a method is love.

He added that King said the most pressing problem confronting humanity is poverty of the spirit, "which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance." He said King also spoke of the three terrible evils that have grown out of ethical infantilism – racial injustice, poverty and war – all of which are intertwined.

In his "Beyond Vietnam" speech, delivered in New York City one year to the day before he was assassinated in Memphis, King for the first time spoke out against the Vietnam War, Coleridge said.

"He said, 'A time comes when silence is betrayal, and that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam,'" Coleridge related. He added that King gave seven reasons to oppose the Vietnam War and bring Vietnam "into the field of my moral vision."

"Thus, he challenged public policymakers to end the war. But he also challenged people of conscience to act to end the war as well," Coleridge said.

He went on to speak about King's observations that the United States was on the "wrong side of a world revolution," and King, quoting the late John F. Kennedy, said, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable."

King, he added, was convinced that if the United States was to get on the right side of the world revolution, "we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values." And the revolution of values meant a shift from a "thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society."

"To King, the rights of people needed to be placed front and center in our moral view, above the rights of property,

profits, corporations (and) technologies – to achieve peace and justice,” Coleridge noted.

King’s words regarding the country’s greatest defense against communism was to take offensive action in behalf of justice are just as profound today when the word “terrorism” is substituted for “communism,” Coleridge said.

“Nonviolence was the means to enable love to flourish. This message is important for us today,” Coleridge said. He added that violence today is seen as practical, realistic, sound, logical and mature, while nonviolence and love are “pie-in-the-sky, wishy-washy, wishful, impractical, unrealistic, unsound, illogical and immature.”

Coleridge brought it into perspective by reminding the audience that violence in Iraq has resulted in more than 3,000 U.S. deaths, 655,000 Iraqi deaths, and more than \$300 billion spent for what he called “an illegal, unconstitutional and immoral war, and now foreign military occupation.”

“With no end in sight, just like Vietnam, exactly whose beliefs are naive? Wishful? Illogical?” he asked.

To honor King’s life and legacy, Coleridge urged those in attendance to do more than show up to once-a-year events in his name. He also urged them to protest and resist the Iraq War in all its forms, including further occupation funding. “Not one more death, not one more day, not one more dollar should be our mantra,” he said.

Afterward, Coleridge elaborated that King was not simply a man who promoted civil rights but one who made the connections and intertwined the issues of racism, poverty and war.

“And that is a message I think we need to understand today. And that he worked in addressing these issues through using the tool of nonviolence,” he said.

Coleridge said he doesn’t believe everything would be all right if the United States pulled out of Iraq today.

“If we left Iraq today there would certainly be continued violence, but there is continued violence in our present stay.”

He added that one of the key problems in Iraq is that the U.S. presence is antagonizing the situation, “and removing the soldiers would remove at least one source of the antagonism.”

The situation now, he said, is “to where anything that would be done at this point in time would be a bad choice. The question is: What is the least bad choice?”

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