

MLK Day January 17, 2022: Remembering King's Opposition to Nuclear Weapons

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More than fifty years after his death, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is remembered as a civil rights icon, recalled for his stirring words at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 when he declared "I have a dream!"

Beyond that, for lots of people, things get blurry. When an MLK parade is led by the local high school ROTC honor guard, equipped with guns, in full military regalia, one wonders what the apostle of nonviolence who decried war in all forms, might have said about that.

No need to guess, though, about what King would have said about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and we might suspect he would not have been displeased that the anniversary of the Treaty's entry into force falls just a week after his January 15th birthday, on January 22.

Here are just a few of the things King said about nuclear weapons back in the day.

In the last Sunday sermon he preached, days before his assassination, King said:

“It is no longer a choice, my friends, between violence or nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence, and the alternative to disarmament, the alternative to a greater suspension of nuclear tests, the alternative to strengthening the United Nations and thereby disarming the whole world may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation, and our earthly habitat would be transformed into an inferno that even the mind of Dante could not imagine.”

King was not a latecomer to the discussion about nuclear weapons. In the early days of his public ministry, in 1957, he said:

“The development and use of nuclear weapons should be banned. It cannot be disputed that a full-scale nuclear war would be utterly

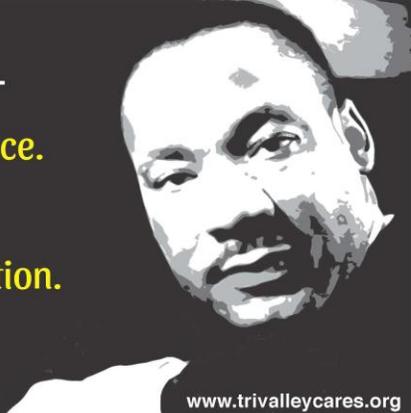
catastrophic. Hundreds and millions of people would be killed outright by the blast and heat, and by the ionizing radiation produced at the instant of the explosion . . . Even countries not directly hit by bombs would suffer through global fall-outs. All of this leads me to say that the principal objective of all nations must be the total abolition of war. War must be finally eliminated or the whole of mankind will be plunged into the abyss of annihilation.”

It is worth noting that King's objections to nuclear weapons were not superficial; he understood the devastating effects of the bombs and the reality that the effects of nuclear war would not be limited to the combatants; they would be global. In that sense, he was decades ahead of his time—scientists now know that even a limited nuclear exchange would trigger a nuclear winter that would cause a global famine.

King also called for his religious colleagues to join him in his denunciation of nuclear weapons. "I am convinced that the church cannot remain silent while mankind (sic) faces the threat of being plunged into the abyss of nuclear annihilation," he wrote in 1963 in the *Christian Century*. "If the church is true to its mission, it must call for an end to the arms race."

Unfortunately, King's statements about nuclear weapons could be delivered today with equal cogency and even more urgency. Now, nine nations possess nuclear weapons, and they are deployed on hair-trigger alert around the globe. Military experts like former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry and analysts at the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* agree that the threat of nuclear devastation is greater now than at any time in our history.

If you want an MLK sound-bite on nuclear weapons, here's what he said about nuclear war in an article in *Liberation* magazine, 1959: "I have unequivocally declared my hatred for this most colossal of all evils."



MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. ON NUCLEAR WEAPONS

**The choice today is nonviolence or nonexistence.
The alternative to disarmament may well be a
civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation.**

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