

What Martin Luther King, Jr. Said About Rioting and Violence

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was absolutely clear and unequivocal in insisting that nonviolent protest and civil disobedience against injustice was always morally and socially justified. Without justice, he said, there could never be genuine “law and order.”

But Dr. King was equally clear and unequivocal in insisting that rioting, looting and violence had absolutely no legitimate role in protests against injustice. They were not only wrong in moral terms but deeply damaging and destructive to the movement and struggle for justice.

The following quotes from Dr. King display his firm and deeply held views.



“To destroy anything, person or property, cannot bring us closer to the goal that we seek.”

Where Do We Go From Here, p. 138

“...Nowhere have the riots won any concrete improvement such as have the organized protest demonstrations.”

Where Do We Go From Here, p. 59-60

“The problem with hatred and violence is that they intensify the fears of the white majority, and leave them less ashamed of their prejudices toward Negroes.

In the guilt and confusion confronting our society, violence only adds to the chaos. It deepens the brutality of the oppressor and increases the bitterness of the oppressed.”

Where Do We Go From Here, p. 63

“A riot merely intensifies the fears of the white community while relieving their guilt.”

from MLK speech to Grosse Pointe High School, March 14, 1968

“Touring Watts a few days after that nightmarish riot in 1965, Bayard Rustin, Andrew Young and I confronted a group of youngsters who said to us joyously, ‘We won.’ We asked them: ‘How can you say you won when thirty-four Negroes are dead, your community is destroyed, and whites are using the riot as an excuse for inaction?’”

Where Do We Go From Here, p. 120

“If one is in search of a better job, it does not help to burn down the factory. If one needs more adequate education, shooting the principal will not help. If housing is the goal, only building and construction will produce that end.

To destroy anything, person or property, cannot bring us closer to the goal that we seek.”

Where Do We Go From Here, p. 138

“Occasionally, Negroes contend that the 1965 Watts riot and the other riots in various cities represented effective civil rights action. But those who express this view always end up with stumbling words when asked what concrete gains have been won as a result. At best, the riots have produced a little additional anti-poverty money allotted by frightened government officials and a few water sprinklers to cool the children of the ghettos...

...Nowhere have the riots won any concrete improvement such as have the organized protest demonstrations.

When one tries to pin down advocates of violence as to what acts would be effective, the answers are blatantly illogical. Sometimes they talk of overthrowing racist state and local governments and they talk about guerrilla warfare. They fail to see that no internal revolution has ever succeeded in overthrowing a government by violence unless the government had already lost the allegiance and effective control of its armed forces.

...few, if any, violent revolutions have been successful unless the violent minority had the sympathy and support of the non-resisting majority.”

Where Do We Go From Here, p. 59-60

“The problem with hatred and violence is that they intensify the fears of the white majority, and leave them less ashamed of their prejudices toward Negroes.

In the guilt and confusion confronting our society, violence only adds to the chaos. It deepens the brutality of the oppressor and increases the bitterness of the oppressed.

Violence is the antithesis of creativity and wholeness. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible.”

Where Do We Go From Here, p. 63

“Our course of action must lie neither in passively relying on persuasion nor in actively succumbing to violent rebellion,

With the person relying on persuasion, we must agree that we will not violently destroy life or property; but we must balance this by agreeing with the person of violence that evil must be resisted.

By so doing we avoid the nonresistance of the former and the violent resistance of the latter.”

Where Do We Go From Here, p. 138