

Essay on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Giant Triplets of Racism, Extreme Materialism, and Militarism"

"We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. ... When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

Martin Luther King, Jr. April 4, 1967

You are going to write an essay about the quote above. To help you thoroughly understand its meaning, here is a short "glossary" of the terms used.

Radical revolution of values: To make a radical change means to do something about the root causes of a problem. To make a revolution is to dramatically change a situation by "turning things upside down." Values are what we consider and treat as most important. So a "radical revolution of values" would turn a society's fundamental priorities upside down. If the current society values things more people, a revolution would aim to reverse those priorities.

Profit motives: Profit is the money that a business keeps after paying for labor and materials. So a profit motive is what guides decisions businesses make in order to make as much profit as possible. The basic rule is, "spend as little as possible (for example, pay workers very little) and charge customers as much as possible." Whether an action helps or hurts people is not relevant.

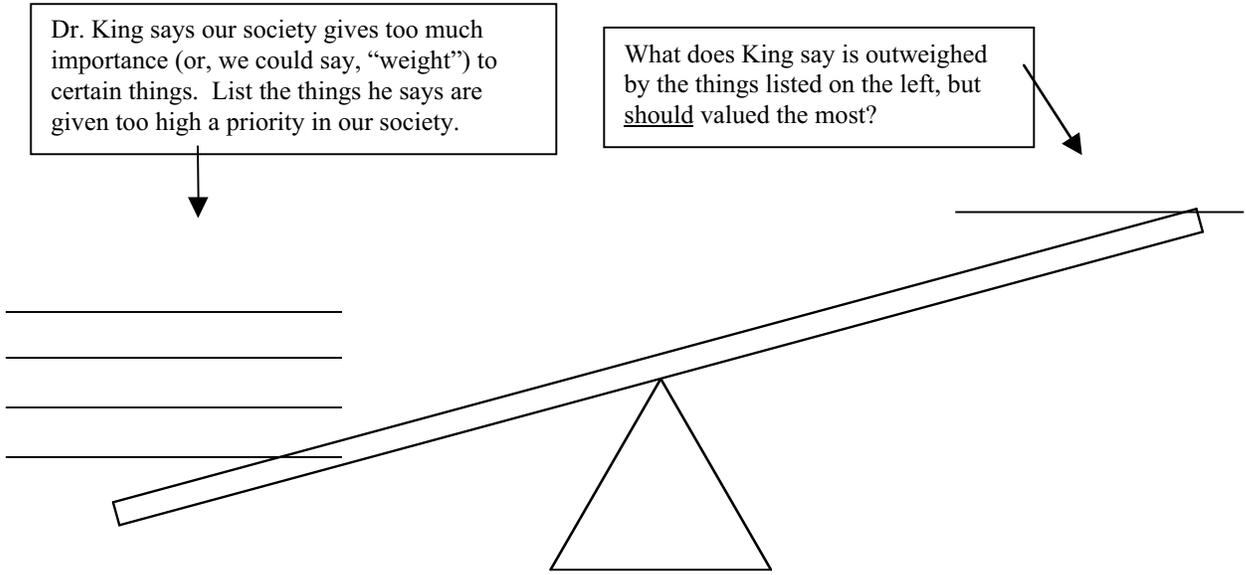
Property rights: These are the rights people have to own property and use it in any way in which they choose in order to make as much profit as possible from that property. King is not talking about personal property, such as your clothes, your food, your home or your car. He is talking specifically about business property, property that brings a profit. Property rights are often in conflict with other rights. For example, a factory owner's right to use toxic chemicals may conflict with the right of people living nearby to clean air and water. A business owner's right to pay low wages conflicts with worker's right to eat or have decent housing.

Racism: Many people define racism as "racial prejudice," but it really is much more than that. It is a massive and centuries-old system of racial oppression. In the United States, racism is the system that grants privileges to people of European descent (whites) and denies those privileges to people of color. The society enforces this system by teaching the ideas of "white supremacy" to every member of the society from the day they're born, providing economic, political and social advantages for whites, and using physical violence against those who threaten the system.

Extreme Materialism: Sometimes "materialism" a value system in which things and money are considered more important than people. In this quote, it's useful to think of materialism as the system that keeps many people poor so that a few can get rich. So for the purposes of this essay, the problem of "extreme materialism" is the same thing as poverty and all of the problems that come with being poor.

Militarism: Militarism is war and everything it takes to make war. It is all of the money and human and material resources spent on making weapons, training soldiers, and waging war. It is the system by which governments and those who influence governments get their way by using their power to kill and destroy.

Break down Dr. King’s “giant triplets” statement on the drawing of the scale below.



Finally, according to King, what three problems (“giant triplets”) will continue to exist until the society changes its priorities?

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Write an essay (at least 800 words) supporting or disputing King’s belief that none of these problems will be solved in a society where “property rights are more important than people.”

Your essay may either agree or disagree with King’s position. If you disagree, explain why you think that one (or all) of these problems can be solved without a “revolution in values” that changes the society’s priority on profits and property. For example, your thesis may state that we can eliminate racism while maintaining a capitalist society driven by property rights and the profit motive. In that case, your essay will explain how racism can be eliminated within that system.

Or your thesis can state that King was correct and that racism will continue as long as profits are considered more important than the needs of every human being. Your essay would then explain how the profit motive and property rights feed racism (and/or militarism and/or poverty).

Show connections between each of part of King’s “Giant Triplets.” Even if you don’t agree that profit motives and property rights feed racism, militarism and materialism, you can still show why King called them the “giant triplets” and why he saw them as connected to each other. For example you could show how one of these “triplets” helps keep another one going or makes it worse. You also could show how one of the problems (racism, for example) is present within one of the other problems (such as in U.S. military actions around the world). Clearly connect your discussion to historical events. King refers to some of the historical events you might address, such as slavery, the Vietnam War and other U.S. military interventions around the world. He also points to examples of poverty and racism in the United States.

Before writing, brainstorm.

1. Read the quotes on the next page. You can also use the handout (“Beyond ‘I Have a Dream’) with nine pages of King’s words. Underline words or phrases in the quotes that help you understand racism, materialism and/or militarism. In the margins, add notes about anything that comes to mind as you read the quotes, including thoughts related to your own knowledge and experience.
2. In the chart provided, list the ideas in each category you underlined and from the notes you wrote in the appropriate boxes.
3. Think of as many connections as you can between the three categories and list them on the lines provided.
4. Finally use all of the ideas and connections you generated to write your essay.

Quotes from MLK on Racism, Militarism and Extreme Materialism

From "Beyond Vietnam" speech – April 4, 1967:

... we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools.

... I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government.

A few years ago ... it seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war. And I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

...[The Vietnamese people] watch as we poison their water, as we kill a million acres of their crops. They must weep as the bulldozers roar through their areas preparing to destroy the precious trees. They wander into the hospitals with at least twenty casualties from American firepower for one Vietcong-inflicted injury. So far we may have killed a million of them, mostly children. ...

We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls "enemy," for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers. *[Notice that King sees a need to remind his audience that the Vietnamese are human beings.]*

This need to maintain social stability for our investments accounts for the counter-revolutionary action of American forces in Guatemala. It tells why American helicopters are being used against guerrillas in Cambodia and why American napalm and Green Beret forces have already been active against rebels in Peru.

...Increasingly, by choice or by accident, ... the role our nation has taken...[is to] make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments...

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

...A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of South America and say: "This is not just." The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just.

From King's presidential address to the SCLC convention, 1967:

A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will "thingify" them, make them things. Therefore they will exploit them, and poor people generally economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else, and will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together.

