The indelible view that most Americans have of Martin Luther King, Jr. is of his powerful “I Have A Dream” speech in 1963. From that “March on Washington” occasion, Dr. King’s clarion call, for a society that would transcend race and focus on character, continues to serve as a beacon toward which Americans strive. However, we do a disservice to King’s memory and importance if we neglect to take account of his expanding social criticism and activism during the last five years of his life. A failure to evaluate King’s public journey after he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 would cause us to miss his vital legacy for democracy and human rights in the 21st century. If Americans are to be true to the spirit, leadership, courage, and wisdom of King, we must recognize, and emphasize, his focus on what he described as the symbiotic relationship of “triple evils” – racism, poverty and war. King increasingly internationalized his concerns after 1963, and he probed deeply to explain the dimensions of our problems and to find ways to address them in the United States and around the globe.

Among the important partnerships that King cultivated was one with Harry Wachtel, a New York City attorney who lived on Long Island. Wachtel became one of King’s closest advisors and the person responsible for planning much of the 1964 Nobel Prize trip to Oslo. Harry and his wife, Lucy, were the only White folks in the official King travel group. Wachtel and King exemplify the coming together of Northerners and Southerners, Jews and Christians, Whites and Blacks. The work they did together (illustrated in the Wachtel Archives at Hofstra University) demonstrates the scope of their vision, the power of their commitment, and their evolving approaches to social reform.

Even as King became a stronger critic of abuses of American society and of global ills, the deep philosophical underpinnings of King’s activism remained unchanged. His continuing priorities were 1) a “beloved community” of Whites and Blacks together, 2) a nonviolent approach to reform, 3) an emphasis that his “dream” was deeply rooted in “The American Dream,” and 4) that all Americans had a responsibility to strive to fulfill their nation’s most noble principles.

Wachtel shared these commitments with Dr. King and he was one of the principal advisers who encouraged linking the battles against racism, poverty and war. Wachtel asked to meet with King in 1962. For the next seven years, Wachtel set aside a lucrative law practice to work pro bono for Dr. King. He served on King’s research council brain trust, which often met in Harry’s New York City office. Wachtel said on one occasion when Dr. King was in the elevator with him and some other white men, a woman entered the elevator and told Dr. King which floor she wanted, assuming he was the elevator man. King later joined Wachtel and others in a private chuckle about the experience.

Wachtel set up the Gandhi Society for Human Rights as a tax-exempt organization to facilitate Southern Christian Leadership Council fund raising. Within months of this endeavor, J. Edgar Hoover was personally monitoring wiretaps on King and his aides, asking about this new lawyer, Wachtel. Wachtel was also instrumental in setting up meetings for King with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, playing a particularly significant role in helping to get a reluctant Lyndon Johnson to support the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

At the invitation of Wachtel, King came to New York on March 25, 1968, ten days before his assassination, to speak at a Rabbinical Conference in the Catskills. King was more exhausted than ever because of his extensive travel, demanding speaking schedule, fundraising, and organizing efforts. His frame of mind was not boosted when Harry informed him that the two of them and Andrew Young would fly to the Catskills in a single engine plane piloted by Roslyn activist, Fred Scheiner. Wachtel also prepped King for a barrage of tough questions from rabbinical leaders who were dismayed by hostility some urban blacks were exhibiting towards Jews and by the growing criticism of Israel by some Black Power militants. Regarding Israel, King said: “We must stand with all our might to protect its right to exist,” but he emphasized that the Middle East also needed a Marshall Plan to help Palestinians out of poverty.

Regarding the issue of anti-Semitism, King noted that it was “virtually nonexistent in the South,” that it was an ugly product of the northern ghetto. He concluded: “You cannot substitute one tyranny for another, and for the black man to be struggling for justice and then turn around and be anti-Semitic is not only a very irrational course, but it is a very immoral
course. Whenever we have seen anti-Semitism, we have condemned it with all our might.” When King completed his discussion, Wachtel said that the rabbis stood, linked arms and sang “We Shall Overcome” in Hebrew. The leader of the conference, Rabbi Abraham Heschel concluded: “The whole future of America depends upon the impact and influence of Dr. King.”

The Wachtel Archives at Hofstra illustrate the increasing focus on the “triple evils” of racism, poverty and war. Harry’s records of the Oslo Nobel Prize trip show that Dr. King insisted on making a side trek to Stockholm to visit the great Swedish scholar, Gunnar Myrdal, whose An American Dilemma had been so inspiring to King. Its particular appeal was Myrdal’s contention that no nation in the history of the world had such noble, explicit commitments to democracy and human rights as the United States; therefore, everyone had a right to expect more of the U.S. than any other country, to expect it to close the gap between its principles and its practices. This analysis inspired Dr. King to contend always that his “dream” was “deeply rooted in the American Dream.”

Wachtel accompanied Dr. King to Hofstra University on June 13, 1965 so that he could be awarded an honorary degree. King dramatically expanded on the linking of the “triple evils,” inspired to do this more often because of the responsibility he felt as Nobel Peace Laureate. During his Hofstra speech, King stressed that the war on poverty is “a war in which we can not afford to have conscientious objectors.” He underscored the need for a domestic Marshall Plan to overcome the persistent “slumism” in the nation.

Wachtel was in the vanguard of those who urged Dr. King to oppose the Vietnam War. The Wachtel archives contain a statement that Harry drafted for the directors of the SCLC in 1966 that said: “We shall not hesitate to challenge the policies and actions of our government whenever we believe that they may lead our world closer to war and annihilation.” King had been a critic of the war since 1965, but had not made this a major public theme. Other black leaders, such as Whitney Young, became increasingly critical of King’s opposition to the war because they felt there was a risk in opposing President Johnson who had been an ally for civil rights. For a few years, Coretta Scott King, who had become a member of Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, when she was in college, represented Martin at many anti-war gatherings.

Finally, in 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. felt that he could no longer equivocate in his public stance. Before 3000 people at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, sharing the podium with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Columbia University historian Henry Steele Commager, King proclaimed: “A time comes when silence is betrayal.” Prior to the speech, Wachtel was among the many King advisers who were writing memos on the war issue. Wachtel itemized three principal reasons why King must speak out publicly and forcefully: 1) because he is a Christian minister, 2) because the Nobel Prize “was a commission to work harder for the brotherhood of man . . . a calling beyond national allegiances,” and 3) because he was a civil rights leader who had condemned silence in the face of injustice. King incorporated all of Wachtel’s suggestions among the seven reasons he gave for speaking out more forcefully.

King warned on April 4, 1967: “A nation that continues year after year to spend more on military defense than on programs of social uplift is already approaching spiritual death.” As always, he emphasized that injustice anywhere was a threat to justice everywhere, and that “every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole.”

Later, reflecting on his steps to the Riverside Church speech, King observed: “I backed up a little when I came out in 1965. My name then wouldn’t have been written in any book called “Profiles in Courage.” But now I have decided. I will not be intimidated. I will not be harassed. I will not be silent and I will be heard.” The year after King was killed, Wachtel used the memorial occasion at Riverside Church to elaborate on the agonizing process of deciding to oppose the war full throttle and to link it with race and poverty. King and his closest supporters took these steps, notwithstanding the opposition of several major black leaders, the desertion of white middle class supporters, including much of the press, and the enmity of Lyndon Johnson.

In a remarkable sermon that he gave shortly before his death, Dr. King said he wanted to be remembered as a “Drum Major for Justice.” His heroic life provides extraordinary lessons for citizenship and democracy today. His partnership with Harry Wachtel reveals the principled commitment of both men and the ways they and other key allies developed strategies and actions to confront the triple evils and to raise the consciousness of Americans and people around the world so that their heightened awareness would produce more actions for inclusive human rights.
Commencement Address by Martin Luther King, Jr. at Hofstra University, June 1965

If we are to survive, then somehow our spiritual and moral lag must be eliminated. Enlarged material powers spell enlarged peril if there is no proportionate growth of the soul. The problem of spiritual moral lag which constitutes modern man’s chief dilemma expresses itself in three larger problems which grow out of man’s ethical infantilism. Each of these problems, while appearing to be separate and isolated, is inextricably bound to the other. I refer to the evil of racial injustice, the evil of poverty, and the evil of war . . .

Racial injustice is still the Negroes [sic] burden and America’s shame . . . Every individual of goodwill must work passionately and unrelentingly to get rid of racial injustice. We must start in our individual lives and we must work through various movements. And we must develop powerful and creative action programs, to rid our nation of the last vestiges of segregation and discrimination . . . If democracy is to live, segregation must die . . .

The second problem is that of poverty. Whether we realize it or not, almost two-thirds of the people in the world go to bed hungry at night . . . More than a million people sleep on the sidewalks of Bombay every night. More than 600,000 sleep on the streets of Calcutta every night . . . And most of these people have never seen a physician or a dentist. So poverty is a reality all over our world. But not only that, we face it in our own nation. Some forty million of our brothers and sisters, right here in the United States find themselves perishing on the lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. So often we fail to see these people, Michael Harrington in The Other America call them “the invisible poor” . . . A great society is a compassionate society . . . [A] Harvard geologist wrote a book entitled Nothing to Spare. He sent forth the basic theme that famine is wholly unnecessary in the modern world. Today, therefore, the question on the agenda must read, why should there be hunger in any land, in any city, at any table, when man has the resources and the scientific know-how to provide all mankind with the basic necessities of life? Even deserts can be irrigated and topsoil can be replaced. We cannot complain of a lack of land, for there are 25 million square miles of tillable soil of which we are using less than seven million. We have amazing knowledge of vitamins, nutrition and the chemistry of food and the versatility of atoms. There is no deficit in human resources; the deficit is in human will.

So the challenge facing us is to go all out to get rid of poverty. Our President had initiated a war against poverty. This war on poverty must be expanded. This is one war in which we must have absolute participation. This is one war in which we cannot afford to have conscientious objectors. Everybody must join the war against poverty. In the final analysis, the rich must not ignore the poor, because both rich and poor are tied in a single garment of destiny caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. All life is interrelated, and all men are interdependent . . .

And now the other problem is a pressing problem facing every nation. And it is a problem facing our nation in a very strong and real sense today. You will face the challenge of taking a stand on this question. It is the question of war . . . The terrible, ugly conflict in Vietnam reveals to us that we stand, in a real sense, in danger of another world war. And it reveals to us that the clouds of that war are hovering mighty low. So it is necessary to work hard to get rid of war, to bring about disarmament. For if we assume that mankind has a right to survive, we must find some alternative to war and violence. In a day when vehicles are dashing though outer space, guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can win a world war. It is no longer a choice between violence and non-violence. It is either non-violence or non-existence . . . So we must work in every nation in every land to get rid of war, so that we will beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks, and nations will not rise up against nations. Neither will they study war no more . . .

The challenge before each of us assembled here today is to become an involved participant in getting rid of war, and getting rid of poverty, and getting rid of racial injustice. Let us not be detached spectators or silent onlookers, but involved participants.

Questions
1. What is the nature of the three problems King emphasizes?
2. Do you think that any parts of the speech might have been threatening to certain people? If so, what parts, and why? And what sorts of people?
3. Do you think it was wise of King to expand the dream expressed in his March on Washington speech to include these “triple evils?”