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**Why Don't We Have a Peace Memorial?
The Vietnam War and the Distorted
Memory of Dissent**

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Why Don't We Have a Peace Memorial? The Vietnam War and the Distorted Memory of Dissent

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I

Exactly a year before he was murdered, Martin Luther King Jr., gave one of the greatest speeches of his life, a piercing critique of the war in Vietnam. Two thousand people jammed into New York's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, to hear King shred the historical, political, and moral claims U.S. leaders had invoked since the end of World War II to justify their counter-revolutionary foreign policy. The United States had not supported Vietnamese independence and democracy, King argued, but had repeatedly opposed it; the United States had not defended the people of South Vietnam from external Communist aggression, rather it was itself the foreign aggressor-- burning and bombing Vietnamese villages, forcing peasants off their ancestral land, and killing, by then, some one million civilians. "We are on the side of the wealthy, and the secure," King said, "while we create a hell for the poor."¹

The war was an "enemy of the poor" at home as well. The United States sent poor black and white boys "to kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools." The military draft was biased in favor of the privileged in

¹ King's Riverside Church address, "Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence," has been reprinted in numerous publications. It is also accessible online: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>

every imaginable way—most obviously by granting deferments to those who could afford to go to a four-year college full time, but also by making it far easier for those with private doctors to get medical exemptions for things like a minor bone spur—the basis for President Donald Trump’s medical exemption. Moreover, as King pointed out, not only were the poor and working class doing a disproportionate amount of the fighting in Vietnam, but the vast expense of waging a war 8,000 miles away required serious cuts to the domestic social programs of Johnson’s Great Society—programs that promised to narrow economic and racial inequalities at home. As King put it, the Great Society was “shot down on the battlefield of Vietnam.”

But those criticisms did not go far enough, King cautioned. The Vietnam War was merely “a symptom of a far deeper malady.” Unless there were a “revolution of values,” the “giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism” would continue to betray the nation’s greatest ideals. Meaningful change required not only the end of war in Vietnam but the replacement of allegiances to “tribe, race, class, and nation” with “loyalty to mankind as a whole.” Without those radical transformations, King concluded, the United States would remain “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.”

The Riverside speech alone should place King in the pantheon of 1960s antiwar activists. Yet in public memory, his opposition to the Vietnam War is largely forgotten. Why? Part of the answer goes back to the media’s vitriolic denunciation of the 1967 speech. In a characteristic condemnation, *Life* magazine insisted that Reverend King had gone “beyond his personal right to dissent” by advocating “abject surrender” in a “slander that sounded like a script for Radio

Hanoi.” Many commentators said King should stick to domestic civil rights and let his criticism of U.S. policy stop at the water’s edge.²

King did not back down. Later that month, he renewed his attacks on the war and added this: “Oh, the press was so noble in its applause . . . when I was saying, ‘Be non-violent toward Bull Connor’” referring to the commissioner of public safety in Birmingham, Alabama, who turned firehoses and attack dogs on peaceful civil rights demonstrators. But that same press, King continued, “will curse and damn you when you say, ‘Be non-violent toward the little brown Vietnamese children.’”³

Fifty years later, we are still plagued by the racial hypocrisy and violence that King denounced. Powerful people and institutions still tolerate and promote racism at home while waging war against nonwhites abroad. Think only of the many police officers who have been acquitted of murdering unarmed African Americans such as Eric Garner and Michael Brown, or of President Donald Trump’s insistence that the white supremacists who attacked peaceful counter-protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia included “some very fine people.” Overseas, the Trump administration continues to “bomb the shit out of” foreign targets not just in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, but in Yemen (in league with Saudi Arabia) and in Somalia. America’s imperial footprint and assertion of military power is nowhere in decline. Indeed, since 2011, when journalist Nick Turse began a careful count, the United States has conducted military operations in at least 120 countries every year, roughly 70 percent of the nations on earth.⁴

² *Life*, April 21, 1967; *Washington Post*, April 6, 1967

³ King describes this lesser-known address as a sermon. It was delivered at Riverside Church on April 30, 1967.

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet/riversidetranscript.html>

⁴ Trump’s comments on the Charlottesville protests generated many articles. See, for example, Rosie Gray, “Trump Defends White-Nationalist Protesters: ‘Some

Recent state-sanctioned violence has not gone uncontested, particularly at home with movements such as Black Lives Matter. And, in foreign policy, polls indicate that as early as 2006 a majority of Americans opposed the apparently endless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. But despite broad antiwar opinion, there is not a broad and vibrant antiwar movement or culture. That is one of the most striking differences between our own time and the Vietnam era. In the 1960s, an ever-growing number of Americans came to share Martin Luther King's antiwar views and to express their dissent in a multiplicity of forms—petitions, vigils, sermons, teach-ins, electoral politics, demonstrations, marches, door-to-door organizing, draft resistance, civil disobedience, music, art, theater, you name it.

Indeed, as I've argued in *American Reckoning*, the Vietnam War undermined public faith in American exceptionalism like no other event in our history. Never before had such a wide range of citizens, cutting across lines of class, race, gender, and religion, rejected the claim that the United States was a unique and invincible force for good in the world, always on the side of freedom, democracy, and human rights. As Martin Luther King made clear, The Vietnam War blatantly contradicted every assumption of moral superiority, and even pro-war hawks were left to wonder how the greatest military power in world history had been unable to prevail against a nation of rice farmers.⁵

Very Fine People on Both Sides,”” *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017; for Trump on bombing see Luke Mogelson, “The Recent History of Bombing the Shit Out of ‘Em,”” *The New Yorker*, April 20, 2017. Nick Turse has many articles on U.S. special operations. See, for example, http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176300/tomgram%3A_nick_turse%2C_the_commandos_of_everywhere/

⁵ Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Viking, 2015).

The antiwar movement, along with the civil rights movement, the student movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, the gay rights movement—all the progressive movements of the 1960s were crucial to this process of national soul-searching, this great awakening of national self-criticism. One small but telling measure of this shift is a 1971 poll in which 58 percent of Americans believed that the war was not only a mistake (71 percent thought that), but immoral.⁶

For the political right, however, defeat in Vietnam was an intense motivator. Conservatives were determined to rebuild everything they thought the war had destroyed—U.S. power, pride, prestige, and patriotism. Above all, they sought to resuscitate a faith in U.S. exceptionalism. That restoration project was surprisingly successful, but it produced a new, makeshift form of U.S. exceptionalism that is different from its original model. In place of the universalistic, idealistic, intrinsically confident faith in national superiority of the 1950s, the post-Vietnam version of exceptionalism is ever more nationalistic, defensive, bombastic, and xenophobic. Both versions are dangerously imperialistic and aggressive, but our latest model is more explicitly founded on a demonization of foreign—primarily nonwhite—others.

The new U.S. exceptionalism has many sources, but two important ones were born from the bitter memory of failure and defeat in Vietnam: the effective campaigns to vilify the antiwar movement and to instill deference to the military by constructing an image of U.S. troops and veterans as icons of heroic victimhood. These two efforts were mutually reinforcing. Antiwar activists since the Vietnam

⁶ George Herring, *America's Longest War*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p. 300.

War have been widely cast as cowardly draft-dodgers who scorned and betrayed their patriotic peers who served in Vietnam.⁷

Indeed, King is not included in the pantheon of antiwar activists precisely because, in U.S. public life and memory, there is no peace pantheon to join. We have no national sites and stories that commemorate the 1960s antiwar movement—no museums, memorials, parks, highways, or holidays. Nowhere can you find a major public celebration of the most diverse and dynamic antiwar movement in U.S. history.

By contrast, the civil rights movement has been honored in many ways, including a national holiday named for its most famous leader. Martin Luther King Jr. is a national hero in public memory but his radical critique of the Vietnam War and U.S. foreign policy more generally is largely forgotten, or at least carefully sealed off from the tributes to his nonviolent struggle for equal rights. As for Vietnam veterans, in addition to “the Wall” in Washington, D.C., there are hundreds—perhaps thousands—of state and local memorials, Vietnam veteran highways, and public spaces named in honor of Americans who served and died in the war. Baby-boomers can even point with pride to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Yet nowhere can you find a major public celebration of the most diverse and dynamic antiwar movement in United States history.

Perhaps you expected to find it, at long last, in the ten-part, eighteen-hour PBS documentary, “The Vietnam War,” by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. If so, you were disappointed. The \$30 million-dollar film, released in 2017, features some flattering profiles of Vietnam veterans who joined the antiwar movement, but peace activists who lack a military credential are virtually invisible. The two civilian

⁷ For a fuller discussion of this argument see Appy, *American Reckoning*, ch. 8

antiwar activists who do appear (out of eighty interviews) criticize the peace movement more than the war. One of them tearfully apologizes for calling veterans “baby-killers, and worse.”⁸

One of the most common charges against the peace movement is that protesters literally spat upon returning Vietnam veterans. A typical version of the story is set in an airport where a “hippie chick” walks up to a uniformed veteran and spits on him. So many of these stories piled up in the decades after the Vietnam War, it seemed as if everyone had heard about a veteran to whom it had happened. But, according to sociologist and Vietnam veteran Jerry Lembcke, there is simply no empirical evidence from the war years to support such a claim. In his book, *The Spitting Image*, Lembcke argues that “the spat upon veteran” is a kind of urban legend that mushroomed into a major post-Vietnam myth—and a politically useful one at that. It served to further stigmatize and shame the antiwar movement, helped construct a caricature of Vietnam veterans as patriotic victim-heroes, and gave ballast to the rightward shift in American political culture from the Reagan presidency on.⁹

Although Hollywood is often assumed to be a bastion of liberal politics, it is hard to name more than a few movies that provide flattering portrayals of antiwar activists. It’s much easier to find the opposite. Think, for example, of *Forrest Gump* (1994), in which an arrogant, sanctimonious antiwar leader takes one look at the film’s hero in his military uniform and asks, “Who’s this baby-killer?”¹⁰

⁸ For my seven-part review of *The Vietnam War*, see the Organization of American Historians blogsite: <http://www.processhistory.org/tag/vietnam-war/>

⁹ Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Appy, *American Reckoning*, p. 266

With veterans so firmly cast as victims of peaceniks in our national consciousness, the next logical step was to offer them automatic hero status. Since 9/11, the ritualized support for troops and veterans, far more symbolic than substantive, has become obsessive. “Thank you for your service” has become an American mantra and we are constantly reminded that we need to do more to demonstrate our gratitude. And so we have yellow ribbons, airport greeters, honor flights, and benefit concerts, but no national debate about why our government continues to order troops to fight unpopular wars that offer no evidence of enhancing the safety or freedom of anyone.¹¹

Since the 1980s, many students have begun my courses on the Vietnam War convinced that the most shameful thing about the Vietnam War was not the death and destruction the United States visited on Vietnam, or even the U.S. defeat, but the terrible way antiwar activists treated veterans.

So here are some things we should remember about the antiwar movement. The first thing I want to stress is that marches, protests, demonstrations, signs, chants are the tip the iceberg of social movements. But since they are so photogenic I suspect many people think that’s all that’s involved. In fact, social movements are extremely labor intensive. They are built on several key pillars—education, communication, and organization. We often forget how important education is in the formation of mass dissent, perhaps especially dissent against foreign policy over which the government exercises so control through secrecy and propaganda. The Vietnam era antiwar movement created a diversity of educational vehicles to counter the government’s claims, many of them false.

¹¹ See Rory Fanning, “Why Do We Keep Thanking the Troops?” http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175912/tomgram%3A_rory_fanning_why_do_we_keep_thanking_the_troops/

For example, in 1965, campuses around the nation held mass “teach-ins” in which speakers would discuss and debate meaning and legitimacy of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The first one, at the University of Michigan, in March 1965, attracted 3500 students and lasted all night. Women students had to get special permission to attend since there were still strict curfews for female students. One May teach-in broadcast from Washington, D.C. reached 122 campuses. These forums were crucial in providing facts activists depended on to bolster their antiwar convictions and attempt to persuade others, facts still unknown to most Americans. At a teach-in you might have learned, for example, that Vietnam has a long history of resisting foreign domination; that it had struggled since the late 19th century against French colonial rule and had a legitimate claim to its independence at the end of World War II. However, the United States supported the French re-conquest of Indochina and largely funded France in its brutal but unsuccessful eight-year war to crush the Vietnamese revolution. You would also likely have learned that in 1954 an agreement in Geneva temporarily divided Vietnam into two zones but also called for a reunification election in 1956. That election was sabotaged by the United States and the South Vietnamese government because they were convinced that communist Ho Chi Minh would have won an overwhelming victory. Another key basis for dissent came with growing awareness that the United States was not supporting democracy or self-determination in Vietnam, but was supporting a repressive, authoritarian government against a popular uprising of its own people.¹²

¹² On teach-in see, for example, “The First U of M Teach-In (March 1965),” http://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antivietnamwar/exhibits/show/exhibit/the_teach_ins/first_teach_in

Along with the teach-ins, antiwar information was provided by a proliferation of books, pamphlets, and underground newspapers. And by war's end, hundreds of those antiwar newspapers were published by active duty GIs—additional evidence that the reductive postwar image of veterans as patriotic victims of the antiwar movement is profoundly flawed.¹³

I don't have space to do justice to the organizational challenges of the antiwar movement, except to say that we need to remember that in an era prior to computers, cell phones, and the internet, simply communicating with like-minded people in other states was a gigantic and expensive undertaking. If you look through archival collections of antiwar material, one of the most striking things you'll find is the painstaking effort that was made to identify and broadcast the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of other antiwar groups and individuals across the country.

On top of those challenges, the antiwar movement was constantly under siege by the government and antiwar organizations. It was denigrated, harassed, spied upon, infiltrated, and attacked. In spite of the obstacles, it can in fact claim substantial success. The successes, of course, hardly lived up to the hopes of activists. After all, the fighting lasted fifteen years, it cost some three million lives, did unspeakable violence to civilians (more than half of the casualties), destroyed thousands of towns and villages, and poisoned the land with toxic defoliants and unexploded ordnance.

¹³ On antiwar GIs and veterans see, for example, David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), Richard Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veteran Dissent During the Vietnam Era* (New Brunswick, NY: Rutgers University Press, 1996), Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: NYU Press, 2001).

However, the antiwar movement can take credit for driving two war-making presidents from office—Lyndon Johnson (who dropped out of the 1968 election when effectively challenged by two antiwar candidates) and Richard Nixon (whose Watergate crimes originated in illegal attempts to silence antiwar criticism).

The peace movement led Nixon to the realization that he would have to begin to withdraw American troops from Vietnam even as he still hoped to preserve a permanent non-Communist South Vietnam by intensifying the bombing and expanding the war in other ways. And, in the fall of 1969, the major antiwar demonstrations of October 15 and November 15 led Nixon to back away from the “savage, punishing blow” he had threatened to deliver against North Vietnam by means of renewed bombing of northern cities and the mining of harbors. At the time, Nixon said the antiwar movement had no impact whatsoever on his decision making. In his memoirs, however, he concedes that he canceled Operation Duck Hook (the “savage, punishing, blow”) because of the massive demonstrations that were attracting such a broad spectrum of people—including lots of very respectable-looking, church-going people of all ages.¹⁴

In Kalamazoo, the October 15, 1969, antiwar Moratorium attracted 7000 to 8000 marchers who walked from the campus of Western Michigan University to downtown Bronson Park across from City Hall. The *Kalamazoo Gazette* described it this way: “As they marched it looked like the biggest centipede in the world.” Shifting metaphors, the writer went on: “Viewed from atop WMU’s Sprau Tower, the line of march looked like a half mile long serpent.” Just as impressive, the president of Western Michigan University, James Miller, who had

¹⁴ Joel Lefkowitz, “Movement Outcomes and Movement Decline: The Vietnam War and the Antiwar Movement,” *New Political Science*, Volume 27, Issue 1, 2005.

previously remained virtually silent about the war, participated in a Moratorium teach-in and endorsed U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. “I cannot view our present involvement as other than ill advised,” Miller said. “Withdrawal, in my opinion, would not be catastrophic. We are enmeshed in fighting one of the most potent of modern movements—nationalism.” The Moratorium at WMU was part of what *Life* magazine described as the “largest expression of public dissent ever seen in this country.”¹⁵

It is certainly plausible to believe that the antiwar movement ended the war significantly sooner than Nixon might otherwise have prolonged it. A major factor was the increasing antiwar dissent within the military. By the final years of the war, from 1969 on, the U.S. military in Vietnam and on bases throughout America and the world, experienced epidemic levels of demoralization, desertion, dissent, and disobedience. What the military described as a collapse of discipline took every imaginable form—from violations of regulations governing dress and hair, to drug use, to the combat avoidance, to outright mutiny and the killing of officers by their own men. Indeed, by 1971 there may have been more manifestations of antiwar dissent in the military than on college campuses. One study in that period found that nearly half of all active duty soldiers had participated in some form of disobedience or dissent. Many commanders had serious doubts that they could continue to field an effective fighting force. The nation was close to realizing what was once regarded as a hopelessly dreamy bumper stick slogan: “Suppose they gave a war and no one came.” As *Village Voice* journalist Judith Coburn put it long after

¹⁵ Kazoo Flashback, 1969, <https://sites.google.com/site/kzooflashback/1969>; for *Life* quotation see, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/03/23/the-march-for-our-lives-will-last-a-few-hours-its-impact-will-last-a-generation/?utm_term=.3517e486311d

the war, “When I hear people say we could have won the war, I always think: where were you going to get the soldiers?”¹⁶

I’d like to close with the words of Henry Steele Commager, a historian who came to national prominence in the middle of the 20th century. Although he was known as a liberal (one who criticized McCarthyism), he was an unabashed celebrator of American exceptionalism—the faith that the U.S. was a unique force for good in the world, free of imperial ambitions, persistent inequalities, or war-loving bellicosity. But the Vietnam War awakened in Commager, as in so many Americans, a will to acknowledge and to criticize his own nation’s capacity for evil.

In an article called “The Defeat of America,” Commager wrote:

This is not only a war we cannot win, it is a war we must lose if we are to survive morally We honor now those Southerners who stood by the Union when it was attacked by the Confederacy, just as we honor those Germans who rejected Hitler and his monstrous wars and were martyrs to the cause of freedom and humanity. Why do we find it so hard to accept this elementary lesson of history, that some wars are so deeply immoral that they must be lost, that the war in Vietnam is one of these wars, and that those who resist it are the truest patriots?¹⁷

The war in Vietnam was eventually lost, but the United States, now more than four decades later, has still not embraced Commager’s “elementary lesson.” We have not yet honored those who resisted.

¹⁶ Appy, *American Reckoning*, pp.212-217; for the Coburn quotation see Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Viking, 2003), p. 408.

¹⁷ Henry Steele Commager, *The Defeat of America: Presidential Power and the National Character* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), p. 104.

But Commager's words live on, as do those of Martin Luther King Jr., and so many others who offer a path forward toward peace. If only we would take it.

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VOLUME XVII

***Professions: "Of All Professions Begging is the Best"
A Paper by Michael Davis
Response by Joseph Ellin
Professor Davis' Reply***

No. 1, August 2008

Michael Davis

Illinois Institute of Technology

Joseph Ellin

Western Michigan University

The Moral Justification for Journalism

No. 2, December 2008

Sandra Borden

Western Michigan University

A Free and Undemocratic Press?

No. 3, November 2009

Stephen J.A. Ward

University of Wisconsin-Madison

VOLUME XVIII

Diversity, Democracy and Dialogue in a Human Rights Framework

No. 1, June 2010

Carol C. Gould

City University of New York

***Center for the Study of Ethics in Society:
Celebrating 25 Years***

No. 2, June 2011

**Michael S. Pritchard, Shirley Bach, James A. Jaksa,
Ronald Kramer**

Western Michigan University

VOLUME XIX

Communication and the Pragmatic Condition

No. 1, October 2011

Gregory J. Shepherd

University of Miami

Knowledge, Wisdom, and Service: The Meaning and Teaching of Professionalism in Medicine

No. 2, March 2012

Matthew K. Wynia

The Institute for Ethics and the Center for Patient Safety, American Medical Association

VOLUME XX

Journey of Peace Journalist

No. 1, March 2013

Robert Koehler

Chicago-based syndicated journalist

VOLUME XXI

Anorexia/Bulimia, Transcendence, and the Potential Impact of Romanticized/Sexualized Death Imagery

No. 1, November 2014

Heather D. Schild

Department of Sociology

VOLUME XXII

Vulnerability, Preventability, and Responsibility: Exploring Some Normative Implications of the Human Condition

No. 1, September 2015

Daniel Wueste

Rutland Institute for Ethics, Clemson University

The Germans and Their Nazi Past: To What Extent Have They Accepted Responsibility?

No. 2, April 2016

Martin Hille

University of Passau (Germany)

CRISPR Humans: Ethics at the Edge of Science

No. 3, August 2016

Insoo Hyun

Case Western Reserve University, School of Medicine

***The Wooden Doctrine: Basketball, Moral Character,
and the Successful Life***

No. 4, August 2016

Janelle DeWitt

Visiting Professor of Philosophy, Western Michigan University

Vol. XXIII

The Unifying Power of Education

No. 1, April, 2017

Keagan Potts

Graduate Student of Philosophy, Western Michigan University

Jenji Learn

Graduate Student of Philosophy, Western Michigan University

Spring 2018 Lecture Series

"Where Do You Stand in Times of Trouble"

7:00 p.m. Thursday, January 25

157 Bernhard Center

Moderator: Dale Brown, Graduate Student, Philosophy, WMU

Panelists: Andy Marquis, WMU Prison Education Program

Demetrias Wolverton, Mission Impact Manager, Kalamazoo YWCA

Linwood Cousins, Professor of Social Work and Director of African American and African Studies, WMU

Co-Sponsor: Department of Philosophy

"The Humanities in the Age of Demagoguery"

7:00 p.m. Thursday, February 8

3508 Knauss Hall

David Denby, staff writer and former film critic for *The New Yorker*

Part of the Center for Humanities' "Promise of Education" speaker series

"Legal Ethics in the Media: How Does Fiction Influence Reality?"

4:00 p.m. Wednesday, February 28

Brown & Gold Room, Bernhard Center

Panelists: Norman Hawker, Professor, Department of Finance and Commercial Law, Haworth College of Business

Tonya Krause-Phelan, auxiliary dean, WMU Cooley Law School

Victoria Vuletich, professor, WMU Cooley Law School

Co-Sponsors: Haworth College of Business, WMU Cooley Law School and School of Communication

"Why We Don't Have a Peace Memorial: The Vietnam War and the Distorted Memory of Dissent"

7:00 p.m. Thursday, March 29

1028 Brown Hall

Winnie Veenstra Peace Lecture

Christian Appy, professor of history, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Co-Sponsors: Southwest Michigan Educational Initiative on the East Indian Ocean, Haenicke Institute for Global Education, Department of History and Department of Sociology.

"Educational Equity: From the 'Kalamazoo Case' to the 'Kalamazoo Promise' and Beyond"

6:00 p.m. Monday, April 2

204 Bernhard Center

Co-moderators: **Kathy Purnell**, instructor, Department of Political Science, and **Ashley Atkins**, assistant professor, Department of Philosophy.

Panelists: **Jim Robb**, general counsel and associate dean of alumni and public relations, WMU Cooley Law School

Cyekeia Lee, director of outreach and partnerships, Kalamazoo Promise

Michael Evans, executive director, Kalamazoo Literacy Council

Sandra Standish, executive director, KC Ready 4s.

Co-sponsors: WMU Cooley Law School and College of Education and Human Development

“Inequality, Citizenship, and the Promise of Education”

7:00 p.m. 2452 Knauss Hall

Danielle Allen, professor of government, Harvard University

Part of the Center for Humanities’ “Promise of Education” speaker series

“Education Reform and the Promise of Public Education”

7:00 p.m. Room 2000 Schneider Hall

Diane Ravich, research professor of education, New York University

Part of the Center for Humanities’ “Promise of Education” speaker series