

9/11, Liberation Struggles and International Relations: Sharing the Burden and the Possibilities of the Crisis

by Maulana Karenga

IT WAS ACTUALLY THERE, not just on TV this time, but actually live in New York and Washington. The twin towers of the World Trade Center ablaze and eventually crumbling into smoke, ash and tons of rubble, thousands killed, wounded, missing. People walking away dazed, others watching, dumbfounded and in horror. Emergency vehicles assembled in long lines and telltale clusters at the zones of impact. Moreover, Wall Street is closed and government offices shut down all over the country; the Pentagon is in flames and temporarily dysfunctional; all air traffic (except military) is halted; and the President is in flight, hiding and on the run like a fugitive. We cannot believe it or turn off the TV, or change the channel to something less disturbing or walk away and return with the usual programming resumed. War, with its brutal consequences, is no longer conducted in its safe, sanitized and distant forms from the air or in video games. We are in shock. Our carefully cultivated illusions of a war proof society are shattered. We are anxious, insecure, frightened, and eventually angry.

Who would dare do this to us, who are, we say, the greatest power in the world, the keeper of democracy, freedom and civilization in the world? We do not know, or do we? It is too soon to say, but we must say it anyhow. It is, we say with a sneaking racialized suspicion, Middle Easterners, Muslims. We do not think what this premature and blanket condemnation will mean to the Muslims, Middle Easterners, Southeast Asians, Puerto Ricans and other look-alikes among us—citizens and visitors. We will, in spite of our-

selves and our claimed superiority, hold them all responsible for the people we hate among them. The bombings and boycotts of Iraq, the war in Vietnam and the boycott of Cuba are our models for this collective indictment and collective punishment.

IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY, there are three different strands of thinking, which merge into a coherent and instructive whole. There is the Martin Luther King approach, stressing interdependence and developing a sense of shared suffering and loss; a Malcolm X approach which asks us to accept the awesome burden of “chickens coming home to roost” after years of oppression by the U.S. and its allies in the world, and the Anna Julia Cooper approach which asks us to combine the sense of shared grief and suffering with the obligation to think critically and ethically about our current crisis and “to grasp the deep significance of the possibilities of the crisis” for all of humanity.

Thus, in spite of our anger, anxiety and sense of insecurity, we must think through this national tragedy in ways that contribute to the solution of the problem rather than exacerbate and perpetuate it. We have here a window of opportunity to understand and assert ourselves in the world in different ways that create and promote good in the world. All people of good will should participate in this collective thinking and conversation and should bring forth the best values and visions of our spiritual and ethical traditions to aid in shaping a different and moral discourse and policy in this great challenge.

First, we must, of necessity, mourn the loss of human life, of family members, friends, colleagues and neighbors and the fire, police and rescue personnel who gave their lives in an effort to save others. And we must mourn and grieve for them not as isolated victims, but as victims of a cycle of violence that engulfs the world and in which the U.S. plays a significant role. Because loss of loved ones and acquaintances is so personal, we are tempted and taught daily to see only our own suffering, to deny, close our eyes to or minimize the importance of others' suffering. Also, we are not to link this or any of our suffering to the suffering of others, especially those we see as the real or possible source of our suffering. But we are not the only people who have suffered or suffer this violence which engulfs the innocent around the world. And if we are to avoid practicing a selective morality and a selective remembering and thus a selective empathy in the loss of innocent lives, then we must know and feel the pain of others. For it is this mutual empathetic understanding and appreciation of the suffering of others that is one of the key elements in the solution to ending this cycle of violence.

Secondly, then we must reaffirm the sacredness of all human life everywhere and condemn all violence against innocent civilians whether here in the U.S. or in Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Haiti, Bosnia, Guatemala, or Afghanistan. This means taking the difficult moral stand against the thirst for a general blood vengeance that we are called to engage in and support. For beyond the mist of our rightful grief and easily stoked patriotic passion, we must know that it is morally and rationally contradictory to kill innocent people in a general war without specific targets while condemning others who do it. We must avoid practicing a *state terrorism* to counter what we see as small group terrorism. We are told we are fighting terrorism, but is it defined to include not only group terrorism but also state terrorism?

AT THE HEART OF TERRORISM are acts and threats of violence to demoralize, intimidate and subjugate a people. Clearly, a state that bombs a people repeatedly,

engages in selective assassination, collective punishment and kills innocent civilians in great numbers cannot be exempt from this designation of terrorist. In fact, such a state kills more innocents than small group terrorism, given its massive resources and advanced technology.

Thirdly, we must, even in the midst of our rightful grieving, pause and reflect on the possible causes for this devastating attack and how best to respond to it. Surely, we cannot believe the nightly newscasters and selective guests who assure us that the people who did this are simply jealous of our riches, even though millions of us are not rich, but are actually poor. Nor should we believe that they acted out of hatred for freedom, justice and related values. In fact, they argue they are fighting for freedom, justice and the right to self-determination. Perhaps, then, it is not the material goods some of us have that they hate the U.S. for, but for attempts to impose the materialism of a consumerist society on them, to turn them into homogenized consumers of a McWorld system. And perhaps it is not that they are against freedom and justice and related values, but against the U.S.-imposed interpretation of this. In fact, they maintain that they resent the arrogance of imposition and the inequities imposed by a globalism that grinds them underfoot and denies them the right to self-determination and security that we say are indispensable to us and to our allies.

INDEED, THE ATTACK OF 9/11 was not a light matter. It was an extreme act of anger, hatred and violence. Nor was it a recently developed posture. On the contrary, it seems undergirded by a sense of abuse, oppression and state terrorism for years and decades against poor, less powerful, darker and religiously different people, and the asymmetry of suffering these have inflicted. If the perpetrators were from the Middle East, then the oppression and state-sponsored terrorism practiced by the U.S. and its allies over the people of Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon stands out as a provocative example. But also in other parts of the world—the contras in Nicaragua, the CIA in Guatemala and Chile and the brutal intervention in Vietnam—all

speak to a U.S. role that provokes the most severe criticism, anger, resentment and hatred.

WE MIGHT NOT WANT TO CONCEDE any humanity to these particular people, but that is neither the most moral nor rational thing to do if we are to address meaningfully the challenge they pose in the world. Surely, we can and must condemn what they did, but it is also useful to imagine why they did it from their own perspective and to consider whether others feel similarly, even if they refuse to use such means to make their point.

If we did this, we might discover that from their perspective and those of people who would not commit such acts, but are empathetic with their aims, that they did it to: 1) avenge years of state terrorism, mass murder, selective assassination, collective punishment and other forms of oppression by the U.S. and its allies; 2) to demonstrate vulnerability of the U.S. at its crucial centers of power, i.e., financial (Manhattan), military (the Pentagon), and political (Washington, D.C.); 3) to cause the rulers of the country to fear, to be uncertain and to reverse the role of hunter and hunted; 4) to insist on being heard and considered in human, political and military terms; 5) to demonstrate a capacity to strike regardless of the superior strength and technology of the U.S.; and 6) to dramatize and underline in a highly visible way the asymmetry of suffering between the U.S. and the oppressed in the world.

IN THIS CONTEXT OF CRISIS and the call to war, African Americans must self-consciously reaffirm their role as a moral vanguard in the country by taking an ethical stand in several matters, no matter how unpopular. We must speak out *against* the easy non-solution of war and *for* the difficult task of peace. And it must be a peace based on an *ethics of sharing* the good and the tasks of the world, that is, shared status (the inherent dignity and worth of all humans), shared knowledge, shared space, shared wealth, shared power, shared interests and shared responsibility for building the good world we all want and deserve to live in.

It is in this context that Congresswoman

Barbara Lee's stand against war and unlimited powers to the president is so meaningful and praiseworthy. For here she not only stood up for principle in the mist of the fire of patriotic passion, but also reaffirmed our ancient ethical tradition of speaking truth to power and to the people and setting the scales of justice in their proper place among those who have no voice. What an important symbol, a black woman, one against 420, speaking to the best of African and human values as she had done concerning the bombings of Iraq and Kosovo. It is worthy of the best of our foremothers and forefathers, from ancient Egypt to modern America, from Khunanup to King, from Lady TaAset to Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and from Amenomope to Fannie Lou Hamer and Malcolm X.

Secondly, we must defend without hesitation or equivocation the rights and equal treatment of Arabs, Muslims, Southeast Asians and others who are racially profiled and abused and attacked by the government or by private citizens. Thirdly, we must resist the call to unite to kill and to win wars of great devastation. We must reaffirm our moral obligation to repair and heal the world, and insist that the leaders of the country call us together to pursue the more difficult tasks of winning the peace, and securing justice, freedom, material well-being and human flourishing in the world.

Also, we must resist the erosion of civil and human rights under the camouflage of national security and in the midst of the cacophony of calls for vengeance and victory in a war whose horrors will eventually come back to haunt us. Furthermore, we must challenge the U.S. to review and reconstruct its international policy, especially in the Middle East, so that it becomes just and equitable.

THIS WILL BE PERHAPS THE MOST DIFFICULT struggle, not simply because of the U.S.'s uncritical commitment to its major ally in the region, Israel, but also because of the U.S.'s shared demonization of Israel's opponent Palestine and the Palestinian people, and thus the refusal to address the legitimate claims of the Palestinian people and their undeserved and asymmetrical suffering. At


this point, the voices of King, Cooper and Malcolm call on us to recognize the inherent dignity and rights of every person and people and their right to freedom, dignity and a decent life. For without this and the justice it implies and requires, there can be no peace or security for any of us anywhere in the world.

Therefore, we must not allow the propaganda of war, coercive patriotism, and unexamined and dishonest talk of terrorism to confuse or seduce us into denying a people's right of resistance to occupation, their right to self-defense and their right to liberation from oppression. We must not join those who redefine the identity and rights of the oppressed and miscast guerillas as gunmen, freedom fighters as terrorists and an oppressed peoples' right to self-determination and statehood as a threat to security. Indeed, we ought never equate the moral status of the oppressor with the oppressed. The oppressor, unlike the oppressed is not fighting for the moral right of freedom and self-determination, but for power over the oppressed regardless of code words used by the oppressor, such as security, survival, civilization, high cultural values and other self-congratulatory and manipulative categories.

REGARDLESS OF GLOBALIZED ATTEMPTS TO declare the end of rightful and necessary struggles and thus the end of history, we must reaffirm the ongoing need and right of liberation struggles. Struggles to bring and sustain good in the world remain the motive force in human history. At the heart of these struggles are the struggles for freedom, justice, and power of people over their destiny and daily lives and for peace in the world. It is clear that, still: *the oppressed want freedom, the wronged and injured want justice, the people want power and the world wants peace.* And our thought and our practice must not be diverted from these essential, rightful and ongoing struggles. For they are rightfully directed toward achieving free and empowered communities, the just and good society and the good, peaceful and sustainable world.

Likewise, we must constantly remember and reaffirm that these struggles are intimately linked. For there can be no peace

without justice, no justice without freedom and no freedom without the power of peoples everywhere to determine their own destiny and daily lives, to harness their human and material resources, to push their lives forward, to live their lives in dignity and decency, and work for and witness the rightfully expected unfolding of a good future for themselves, their children and the world.

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