



**KING, OBAMA AND THE MOVEMENT:
KEEPING FAITH IN THE FUTURE**
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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

In this month in which we dedicate serious and sustained remembrance, reflection and recommitment to the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, it is only appropriate that we reject the corporate commercials, pacified media portraits and political manipulations of Dr. King and raise up his own voice and the vision of human community he left us to honor, embrace and expand. Moreover, in the context of the current presidential campaign, it is important to draw a distinction between a presidential campaign, government intervention and a social movement, and between the real King and the reconstructed and convenient one. Thru this we, perhaps, can see the possibilities and challenges of Barack Obama's campaign who without claiming it, models King's commitment to racial harmony and common good and King's constant and compelling conviction that "each of us must keep faith in the future" and struggle to bring into being the new society and world we want and deserve.

Hillary Clinton's unguarded claim that Pres. Lyndon Johnson realized, i.e., made real, King's Dream thru his working to pass the '64 Civil Rights Act is mistaken on several levels. First, she misreads King's dream as passing of laws. But King's dream is more expansive. It is for a new society and world of freedom, justice, equality, peace and racial and human harmony. Indeed, King rejects seeing the mere passing of laws as a panacea. He notes, laws are often passed under pressure and "The recording of the law in itself is treated as the reality of reform." But, he argues, justice for Black people will not come from court decisions, laws, political campaigns or "a few token changes." On the contrary, "White America

must recognize that justice for Black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society." Actually, King argued the need for both the mass movement and electoral politics, arguing they complement each other.

Secondly, whatever Johnson or the government did, it did so under pressure of struggle. King tells us that "our nettlesome task is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power so that government cannot elude our demands." He goes on to say "we must develop from strength, a situation in which the government finds it wise and prudent to collaborate with us." Indeed, he argues "It would be the height of naiveté to wait passively until the administration had somehow been infused with such blessing of good will that it implored us for our programs." In a word, he says "the first course is grounded in mature realism; the other is childish fantasy." It is an irony of history that King would call dependence on good will from those in power a "childish fantasy" when those in power label Obama's call for the end of the war on the Iraqi people and perhaps his entire vision a "childish fantasy".

Thirdly, neither King nor his vision dropped from the sky, grew from the ground or floated in from the sea. They grew out of the cultural and social context in which King found himself. It was the social context of oppression in the larger society and a culture actively committed to social justice in the Black community. Clinton's remark was not said in studied disrespect but in unconscious disregard for the work and struggle of Black people to free themselves, expand the realm of freedom and justice in this country and build a new society neither she nor Johnson

and certainly not Jefferson ever imagined. Even unconsciously Whites are used to being the subject of every sentence and the center of all history worthy of merit or mention and thus can imagine they realized others' dreams.

Fourthly, it is Black people who brought King in town, in the Movement and thus, into being, gave him ground and supported him in his personal choice, courage and conviction and social practice that made him the world historical person he became. King conceded the centrality of the people in his first speech to the MIA, calling them to greatness for themselves and history. And when King praised Johnson for his courage under White racist fire in working to pass the bill, even he replied "The real hero is the American Negro," i.e., the African American people. For he knew that it is they who struggled, sacrificed and died so that the realm of freedom and justice could be expanded and secured in society and the world.

King also realized that even good will Whites whom he saw as vital allies in the struggle, tend to embrace self-deceptive fantasies about themselves and society. He notes that "the majority of White Americans consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for (Black people). They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to fair play and to steady growth toward a middle class utopia embodying racial harmony. But unfortunately this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity." For "overwhelmingly America is still struggling with irresolution and contradiction."

Finally, in contemplation of the historic nature of the Obama campaign, like the Jackson Rainbow campaign before him, one is reminded of King's evaluation of the Black Freedom Movement which he said "would have been worthy even if it had only served the cause of civil rights. But its laurels are greater because it stimulated a broader social movement that elevated the moral level of the nation." For him in the crucible of struggle, "decent values were preserved", youth "added stature and meaning to their lives, . . . inspired each other with a sense of moral mission and . . . gave the nation an example of self-sacrifice and dedication." But "the greatest victory of this period," he said was the repair of the Black psyche, the development of a victorious consciousness, as Molefi Asante calls it and that "we armed ourselves," King said, with an expanded sense of "dignity and self-respect."

Thus, in a Kingian sense, the significance and greatness of Obama's campaign will not be winning the presidency though that is of clear historical importance. It will be, if he does it, the building of a social movement in the process that lasts beyond his campaign(s) and presidency and aids in ushering in a truly democratic multicultural just society and a new history of humankind in this country and the world. And it will be driven by a vision undergirded by dignity-affirming, life-respecting and world protecting values to which King dedicated and offered his life as martyr and messenger of a Movement for good in and for the world.

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Black Studies, California State University-Long Beach, Chair of The Organization Us, Creator of Kwanzaa, and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, [www.US-Organization.org and www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org].