



**POLICE RESTRAINT, REFORM AND STRUGGLE:  
NO EASY WALK IN THE PARK**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

May is the month of Malcolm X, the Fire Prophet, and it is one of his fundamental teachings that “of all our studies history is best prepared to reward all research.” So when we think or talk about the police rampage at MacArthur Park on May Day, it is good to remember Malcolm, put it in historical context, and not approach it as if it’s the first time or most ferocious attack. Although there are clear differences between this example of official brutality and others before it, it bears remarkable resemblance to previous rampages by the police. For they all are rooted in and reflective of a deep-seated and unsettling, racist and reckless disregard for the rights and lives of peoples of color.

It is all there, the excessive, unjustified and unjustifiable force, the indiscriminate violence against the vulnerable, the marginalized and suspect; no exemption for anyone, the young, the ill or aged; the vulgar shouting, shoving and shooting at close range; the disabling strikes, jabbing and beatings with the baton; pursuit even of those compliant and withdrawing as ordered; and the need to dominate and demonstrate power and control, even when it’s uncalled for and callously inappropriate. Then there are the easily accessible and assembled excuses—a threat to personal and public safety, a failure to comply, the smirk and smell of resistance from the masses, a judgment call in the depth of a life-and-death situation we should never try to second guess. And there is always the standard police protective league litany of not rushing to judgment and the confident prediction of the ruling of justified force and exoneration of the department, if not the officers.

But although similar, this case has notable differences. First, there was the

willingness of elected Latino leaders at various levels of government and the chief of police to denounce the rampage as wrong and intolerable, even without an investigation. There is also the media factor—the widespread use of video technology and the internet as an important site of disclosure and discourse, preventing the easy disguise or dismissal of the issue. Moreover, the attack involved media persons, Latino/as and others who were injured and have an added interest in correcting behavior they might have otherwise been less attentive to. Another important factor is the long-term political aspirations of the mayor and the short-term reappointment interest of the police chief both of whom are obviously concerned about how this may affect their future and follow them.

Furthermore, there is the international aspect to this attack on a largely immigrant population and the active interest taken in the incident by the Mexican and other Latin American governments as well as the UN special rapporteur on the human rights of immigrants who is Latino. This calls to mind the rise of African states in the 60’s and the impact of this on the Black Freedom Movement and the U.S.’ concern with the battle for the hearts and minds of Africa and the world in the context of the Cold War.

But if we remember the lessons of history and Malcolm, we know that victories can be short-lived and even reversed; that overwhelming evidence can be reread and revised as in the case of Rodney King; that fantasies and falsehood can be turned into facts; and that the injured can be transformed into aggressors and vice versa, especially in the case of invading and occupying armies and their police counterparts in the Middle East or

MacArthur Park. Malcolm calls this “the science of illusion and image-making” and uses the example of how the established order and oppressor can turn victims into criminals and criminals into victims and convince the people that the externally-cultivated and constructed conclusions they come to are actually their own.

So, in spite of the good beginning this response represents, the violators and violations are exposed but not altered, chastised and challenged but not really changed. As history shows, police restraint and reform is no easy work or walk in the park. For the police act not simply because of their subculture mentality as an occupying army in communities of color, but also because of a long-standing assumption that society sanctions their actions and wants and needs them on that wall that separates civilization from those international and local “hordes” who cross the borders and boundaries the ruling race/class has established for them.

History teaches us the way these gestures of repentance and reform usually go. There is the initial outrage at the brutality and abuse, the people’s call for action, and the established order’s call for an investigation. There are the expected delays, a redefinition of the issue more favorable to the police, the eventual reports, a convenient compromise like demotion, reassignment and even firing a few “renegade” officers and negligent commanders to maintain public faith in the system. But the system itself and its approach to communities of color remains in tact. Then, there is a call for us to heal and move on for the sake of social

peace, security, forgiveness and the forging of unity and harmony in this city we call home.

But in addition to the obvious flaws of such a process, one less noticed flaw is that the essential discussions and decisions are made *outside* and *without* the injured communities. This comes from a disdain and distrust of the masses and disbelief in their worthiness and ability to review and recommend or contribute meaningfully to the problems that confront them daily. The need, then, is for us to abandon illusion of justice from on high and struggle to achieve it on the ground, on the battlefield for a new history of humankind. This means linking the struggle against police brutality and for immigration rights to the larger struggle for radical reconstruction of society on every level.

It is at this point that we who are active and aware of the awesome requirements of successful struggle raise the issue of common ground, coalition and alliance, and rebuilding and joining our movements. We share interests in ending police brutality, securing rights and respect for all immigrants—Latino, African, Asian and others, as well as a long list of social justice, educational and economic issues. And we share with the peoples of the world the unfinished struggles for lives of dignity and decency, freedom, justice, peace and flourishing everywhere. Indeed, in our combined efforts as allies in struggle, we, as Malcolm taught, make way for the new world and become midwives of history rather than simple witnesses to its unfolding.