



**QUOTING THE CONSTITUTION IN PUBLIC:  
WHISTLIN' DIXIE IN THE DARK**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**I**t is a sign of the rough and jagged edges of the times in which we live, this surreal juncture of history where we encounter and are cultivated to accept, with minimum and often misguided response, various forms of fear-and-hate mongering, lies, illusions and political lap-dancing – all deceptive by nature, diversionary by design, and ultimately unfulfilling. Passed off as a time and arrival of a new politics, it is a time and context in which hype and hypocrisy are packaged and peddled as patriotism; the reform and reality of universal health care is portrayed as something akin to sin; and corporate funding and manipulation of anti-government sentiment is camouflaged as constitutional concern and love of country.

For all this flag-draped drama and related talk of constitutional tests and of turning the country back over to the American people, hides the continued strengthening of corporate power, evident in the increased funding of candidates, including Tea Party members; proposed deregulation; rampant privatization; an ever-growing military budget and prison-industrial complex; tax preference for the rich and continuing foreign aid to friendly dictators and brutal allies in open and unannounced wars and occupations around the world.

It is a time and context in which gun-totin' and gun talk of "targeting and taking out" opponents serve as both appetizers and main meal on the menu of rightwing radio, and their political discourse and campaigns, and where such vicious rhetoric and social craziness mix and merge with personal anger and insanity to provoke and produce tragic results as recently witnessed in Tucson. For in spite of denials, such a context gives company and confirmation to the mentally disturbed and violent who put in practice the right wing's irresponsible and provocative call for "Second Amendment remedies".

Last week, the new colonists came to Washington town, Constitution in hand, corporate interests in mind and chaos in their announced intentions. Indeed, they came wildly dedicated and determined to disrupt, reverse, repeal and otherwise neutralize the laws, legislative initiatives and any and all efforts of President Obama to successfully govern – a concentrated hostility which, in spite of ritual denial, suggests racial implications. Thus, it is seriously suspected that they quote the Constitution in public and whistle Dixie in the dark. Like the original colonists, whom they seek to model and mirror in their confused and fantasized conceptions of history, they are in acute and constant denial concerning the contradictions in their beliefs, behavior and exalted claims. And likewise, they are woefully unwilling to concede the destructive and divisive nature of their self-righteous and exclusionist ideas and activities, which foster and fuel racist and nativist hatred and violence.

They began their public show, lining up like elementary school children to read the Constitution on the House floor in deference to their doting Tea Party foster parents. It was for the true believers a religious ritual, the reading of a sacred text with related claims of the brilliance and anointment of the Framers. But to hold to the myths, they had to call for an amended version of the Constitution. For the original version of the Constitution, like the men who wrote it, was too flawed to justify the flowery claims made for it. It, like its writers, needed to be remade into a more acceptable image, free of the racism, sexism and classism that stained it. Indeed, the original version sanctioned African enslavement, denied the wholeness of African humanity, setting it as 3/5 of a person and rejecting our right of freedom even thru escape. It also denied women the right to vote, favored property

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owners and set aside the Senate for the more noble White men among them. It is these inconvenient and uncomfortable facts in the Constitution's original construction that the new colonists sought to erase and not reveal by reading a revised and sanitized version of it with its corrective reconsiderations called amendments.

Such immature and uncritical conceptions of the document and attempts to talk about it as a holy writ, unchanged and unchangeable, and to force others to accept it is both self-deceptive and dangerous. It calls for a paper patriotism devoid of real people with real problems and real struggles to solve them. In other words, such an approach to the Constitution denies its original flaws and the flaws of its Framers; denies the changes made to correct these flaws; denies the history and the life-and-death struggles required for the changes; and denies the ongoing need to constantly reinterpret and change the document in light of deeper and more ethical understandings of how we ought to live together and relate.

The late and renowned Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, in his 1987 Bicentennial Speech, urged us to move beyond such mindless and uncritical celebration of Constitution and country. He noted that such a celebration cultivates a tendency "to oversimplify and overlook the many other events that have been instrumental to our achievements as a nation." Moreover, it "invites a complacent belief that the vision of those who debated and compromised in Philadelphia yielded the 'more perfect union' it is said we enjoy now."

For Justice Marshall, the Constitution was not "forever fixed" at Philadelphia. And he noted, he did not "find the wisdom, foresight and sense of justice exhibited by the Framers particularly profound."

Indeed, he states "To the contrary, the government they devised was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war and momentous societal transformation to attain the system of constitutional government and its respect for individual freedoms and human rights we hold fundamental today." Thus, in recognizing the progressive changes made from enslavement and exclusion to our unfinished struggles for freedom and inclusion, "the credit does not belong to the Framers. It belongs to those who refused to acquiesce to outdated notions of 'liberty', 'justice' and 'equality' and who strived to better them." He concluded that a rightful reading and a "sensitive understanding of the Constitution's inherent defects" will let us "see that the true miracle was not the birth of the Constitution, but its life, a life nurtured through two turbulent centuries of our own making."

Justice Marshall argued that this history requires more than "festivities with flag-waving fervor." Rather, it calls for commemoration of "the suffering, struggle and sacrifice that has triumphed over much of what was wrong with the original document." And it deserves our viewing the document and its history "with hopes not realized and promises not fulfilled" and therefore, with a commitment to ongoing and increased struggles to achieve the hopes and promise, and open up new horizons of human life and history.

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