



**CELEBRATING THE 4<sup>TH</sup> OF JULY AFTER CHARLESTON:  
DEALING WITH FREDERICK DOUGLASS' CONCERNS**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**S**urely, the celebration or rather observation of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July after Charleston must have a new meaning and a new message about where we really are in this country, what we should be about, and what illusions we must leave behind if we are ever to truly build the just and good society we all want and deserve. Here, in our moving beyond simply barbecuing, beaching and backyard partying, flying flags and doing fireworks, we can turn to no better source for needed rightful reflection than the classic 1852 July 4th speech of Frederick Douglass.

In this classic speech, Douglass questions how in good conscience could we be asked or expected to truly celebrate a freedom and independence we don't have; a natural and social justice we are not allowed; and a prosperity we do not share; and express a gratitude for benefits we have not yet received? He told his White audience he would not confuse himself or his people with them, the rulers of society, the enslavers and oppressors. There is, he stated, too much a "disparity and distance between us". For "the rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence bequeathed by *your fathers* is not shared by me" (emphasis mine).

American society has set itself up as an exceptional city on a hill, with the coercive power to turn rightful and needed criticism into praise of itself, and humiliation and self-indictment of its victims. But a society that cannot question or criticize itself, cannot correct itself. And a society that cannot and will not correct itself finds itself killing without conscience, mutilating without mercy, and claiming innocence and non-involvement, even with blood on its hands and countless corpses at its feet in faraway countries or here in the communities and sanctuaries of the sacred places of those hated and vulnerable. So it is with American society, afflicted with the interrelated, pernicious and persistent psychological, social and moral disorders of racism and White supremacy.

Consider how Charleston society and the larger American society dealt with the racist massacre of nine African Americans at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church; how they swung into action to suppress righteous anger, divert criticism and self-questioning; and made every effort to resolve the "issue" quickly. Indeed, the established order played on the church's tendency to talk in a language easily used to an oppressor's advantage, a language of love, peace, healing and reconciliation by the oppressed. Moreover, there was little discussion of the imposition, ideology and institutional arrangements of racism and how in concrete terms it kills, not just with guns or in churches, but in countless ways and innumerable places; and how to correct and end it. And thus, the awesome resistance history of the Black church becomes a passing *reference*, not a *resource* for planning and pursuing struggle.

Also, there were numerous diversionary conversations and points of focus to play down the racist character of the massacre, often simply calling it "a shooting", avoiding its murderous and racial aspects. President Obama is to be praised for his eulogy comments on Rev. Pinkney, the Black church, education, poverty, justice, voting rights and the confederate flag. However, his speech writer did him no good service by having him say of the killer, "He didn't know he was being used by God". Such a claim makes God, instead of racist society, a co-defendant and crime partner and certainly, it would not be made in a Jewish synagogue about the killing of Jews or about other Whites in a similar situation.

Indeed, there is no need to nickname the truth, to try to discover a non-existent divine mystery in diabolical acts or to blame human horrors on God. For surely humans are to blame for all the horrors and holocausts of human history. Furthermore, undeserved praise of Whites or America must not be confused with unmerited favor or grace. This is the case with the speech writer's take on "grace" that allows

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for a laudatory claim of change which White America has not undergone, a generosity it has not shown and a desire for reconciliation not reflected in its unwillingness to equitably share wealth, power and status and end oppression.

Also, there was focus on taking down the flag, which while important symbolically, must not divert us from the still-existing and operative culture of racism and White supremacy that conceived the flag, and sanctioned and sanctified it as a sacred symbol. This in no way is to deny or diminish the audaciously defiant act of Bree Newsome and James Tyson who, unwilling to wait, took it down at the Capitol.

Especially important to note was the established order's efforts to get us to collaborate in the suppression of our righteous anger at the gross evil of the massacre and to begin a discussion, not on increased resistance, but on how "best" to love, forgive, forget and show gratitude. This left little time to properly and adequately grieve, to grasp the meaning and horror of it all, to pay rightful homage to the martyrs and discuss ways forward worthy of the sacrifice the martyrs made. History shows that a simple declaration of love, forgiveness and forgetfulness by the oppressed does not change oppressors. Here we remember Douglass' seminal and sustaining insight that "Power concedes nothing without demand, it never did and it never will" and that every gain made and sustained is thru "earnest struggle".

Charleston is off the media charts now, no longer the spectacle of forgiving and forgetting to which it had reduced the sacred narrative of the nine martyrs. The media gave space for the declarations of loyalty, love, forgiveness and

forgetfulness, but had no real place for those who expressed righteous anger and calls for resistance. Thus, it made Charleston a model of how to dampen, divert and dissolve righteous anger at evil, injustice and oppression and calls for continuous and increased resistance.

As the rising tide of Black resistance to racist forms of violence and oppression increases and expands, so will established order calls and moves come into play to counter it and reduce it to harmless declarations of loyalty, love, thankfulness and self-indictment from the injured and oppressed. Whatever particular name any of these calls assume at any given time, the overarching thrust is to promote the idea of "reconciliation" as the moral urgency of the hour. And this is easily turned into a "reconciliation" which means being reconciled to White domination and one's lot, condition and place in an unequal, unjust and oppressive society.

**O**ur response to all this diversion and mystification and to the reality of racist oppression must be as Douglass and all our liberation leaders taught us: *righteous and relentless struggle*. For it is not nice words that enlighten and ease the apprehension and conscience of the oppressor which are needed now. Indeed, as Douglass says, "It is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced".

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