



**“FORGING OUR FUTURE WITH FANNIE LOU HAMER:  
THE URGENCY AND VALUE OF VOTING”**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**I**N THE MIDST OF THE PANDEMIC OF COVID 19, the ongoing pathology of racist oppression and lying imposed as a way of life, the sacred charge to us by our honored foremother, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer (October 6), to constantly question and radically transform America is both urgent and enduringly relevant. She taught that justice and freedom require truth and “if we want America to be a free society, we must stop lying” and stop people’s lying from going unchallenged. Indeed, we must speak truth to the people and speak truth to power. Especially, must we speak truth to the people. For as Mrs. Hamer taught us “power is the people,” an aware and united people, thinking and actively willing the freedom they want and deserve.

Indeed, her call to question America, in thought and practice is an ancient call made at the dawn of moral conscience of humankind. It is this ancient African ethical imperative that calls us “to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place among those who have no voice.” So, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer is a model and mirror for us in our striving to be ourselves and free ourselves, to be ourselves without penalty, punishment, or unjust and vicious restriction and restraint. And we strive and struggle to free ourselves so that we can live good, meaningful and productive lives, flourish, and come into the fullness of ourselves.

Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer emerged as a leader and guiding light in the Black Freedom Movement, especially in our people’s collective struggle for voting rights. It was a right that was constitutionally granted to us with the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment. But we have had to fight to exercise and secure it ever since. She walks off the plantation to work and struggle with others, not simply to vote, but to use the vote as a way to educate, uplift and gain power. She told our people, “We have to build our power. We have to win every office we can.”

So, now, we are coming to a critical election this November 3<sup>rd</sup> and Mrs. Hamer calls for us all to be aware and actively engaged. We must

vote she would tell us, for it is actually and undeniably, in any sane and serious sense, a matter of life and death for us, others, and the planet itself. And we must vote not for a candidate, but rather for *our own vision* and what result we see as the *most promising context to pursue and realize that vision* after the election.

With this in mind, we must vote first because it is for us, a *hard-won right* and *responsibility* to vote, to raise our voice, to speak our own particular cultural truth, and to make our own unique contribution to how this country is governed, reconceived and reconstructed. Mrs. Hamer tells us to speak up, speak out, speak loud, speak freedom and speak justice. She says, “If you don’t speak out nobody is going to speak out for you.” We have a right to vote, a right to freedom of speech and expression. And voting this is an important way to express our choices, to say yea, hey or nay, and as she said, to oppose what’s wrong and unjust and to support what is right and just.

Secondly, we must vote also, because for us as a people, it is a *legacy*, born of service, sacrifice, and righteous and relentless struggle. It is a legacy gifted to us through the risk and loss of lives and livelihoods, the loss of health, homes and whole communities, the loss of security and denial of sanctuary and justice under the law. Mrs. Hamer told us that the real story of the murderous and mutilating history of our oppression reveals that “Every red stripe in that flag represents Black (people’s) blood that has been shed.” It is why she said she could not sing the hypocritical words of the official national anthem. For she said to Black people, “‘the land of the free and the home of the brave’ means the land of the tree and the home of the grave in Mississippi?” And even today with police violence, and killing of Black men, women, and children with reckless and depraved disregard for their lives and rights, how do we praise a country that oppresses us with such pathological persistence and perversity? This is why we must continue to question America and dare to radically reconceive and reconstruct it.

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Thirdly, we must also vote because this is a critical and contested space for policy and resources. You can tell how critical the space is by how many devious efforts and dirty tricks are used to negate our vote, i.e., gerrymandering; disqualifying our votes; discouraging our voting with police and vigilante presence at the polls and robo calls to threaten and frighten; and reducing access for mail-in and in-person voting. And at this critical juncture of our history, as Mrs. Hamer said of one of the critical elections she was engaged in, “There is nothing symbolic about this election . . . we are fighting for our lives.” The issues at stake are food security, clean water, healthcare, housing, employment, adequate income, education, restraining police violence and reconceiving public safety, immigration, fair taxation, poverty reduction, a just and sensible international policy, halting environmental degradation; and the health and well-being of humanity and the whole planet.

Fourthly, we must vote because *we must not collaborate* in our own oppression. To remain silent is to consent. To consent is to approve and facilitate, not only our oppression, but also to approve and facilitate the evil, injustice, unfreedom and oppression that this regime represents. In such a society, people are either complicit as enablers, active supporters and those who give consent by silence and inaction, or they are self-consciously, committed to righteous resistance. There is no neutrality and no safe place from oppression. For as Seba Malcolm taught, the battle line for us is everywhere. And we must, as Mrs. Hamer said, “fight every step of the way” to freedom and justice.

Thus, we must see and engage voting also as *another battleline* and *battlefield*, in a struggle for our lives and so that we and all human beings

can live lives of dignity and decency. Mrs. Hamer tells us, “We can’t wait for things to change, but have to stand up and be men and women.” Prayer, she said can be a prelude to practice, but never a substitute. For “You can pray until you faint, but unless you get up and try to do something, God is not going to put it in your lap.” We must, she repeatedly argued, build our own power, our own community, our own future. For she says, it is not a question of what our oppressor will give us or willingly yield, but rather what we will ourselves gain, win and take in struggle.

Mrs. Hamer also calls for the end of war-mongering and war-making. She condemns with Min. Malcolm and Rev. Martin King, the carnage in Vietnam, the cost in human lives and the diversion of human, material and financial resources to an unjust and vicious war against the Vietnamese people and their right to self-determination. And she calls for an alliance of all peoples, Africans, Native Americans, Latinas/os, Asians and progressive Europeans to join in winning and building a good and just country and world.

**E**NDING IMPERIAL WARS, SHE HOPED WOULD give us an opportunity to turn inward and “to stand and fight together for things that are rightly deserved . . .right here in the United States to make democracy a reality for all the people of the world regardless of race and color.” She wanted us, Black men and women, to “work side-by-side” to bring liberation “to ourselves and all people.” And Mrs. Hamer leaves us with a “special message” to continue the struggle and not mislead the people, accept second-class citizenship or forget the many who “have given their lives to end this evil” of savage and sustained oppression.▲

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