



**MESSAGE FROM WATTS:
LIBERATION IS COMING FROM A BLACK THING**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 08-13-26, p. B-1

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

This is my standard column written to commemorate the Watts Revolt and to pay rightful homage to those who lost, gave and risked their lives to advance the struggle. And it is also in rightful homage to those who have kept the faith, still hold the line and continue the struggle.

The year 1965 began on an ominous and unsettling note - the assassination and martyrdom of Nana Haji Malcolm X, the Fire Prophet. Even in the white and winter cold of February, it was a sign of the coming fire. Indeed, it pointed toward the fiery fulfillment of prophecy which Nana Malcolm, himself, had predicted. It was there, too, in the title of Nana James Baldwin's classic, *The Fire Next Time*. And it was the topic of countless conversations around the country. Baldwin had taken his title from a line in a Black gospel song which says: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water the fire next time."

Nana Malcolm, following Nana Messenger Elijah Muhammad, had talked about God's judgment of and on America and linked it to the rising tide of resistance to White supremacy around the world and to the coming revolt of the oppressed masses of Black people in this country. It was, he taught, only a matter of time before Black people engaged in a rightful and defensive response to the racist and violent oppression by White people. As a Muslim, Min. Malcolm stressed divine fire, but those of us who were less religiously inclined read his prophecy as the

coming fires of freedom rising from red-hot battles we would wage for a better world. And so we worked, watched and waited for the spark that would ignite the prairie fire and usher in the era of Nana Marcus Garvey's promised return in the whirlwind.

Forty years ago on August 11, the people of Watts rose up in resistance to oppression, especially police abuse and brutality. It began with the arrest of Nana Marquette Frye, the intervention and arrest of his mother, Nana Rita Frye, and his brother, Nana Ronald Frye. It was for the people a final unbearable act by the police, seen as an occupying army. And they rose up, and for six days fought running battles with the police who, unable to suppress them, called in the National Guard. They burned down and often emptied before hand stores and shops which they saw as sites and symbols of their exploitation and humiliation. They took over streets abandoned by fleeing police and began to police themselves, conducting traffic and calling for respect for businesses with window signs saying, "Black owned". For a brief moment in history, the people had risen up to say "no" to *police brutality, merchant exploitation, and systemic oppression*, and "yes" to *the right to rebel against oppression and injustice*.

After the six days of righteous rage, upraised fists and fiery resistance, the revolt was over, exhausted in its spontaneity and overwhelmed by the force and

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violence of the established order. But on the seventh day, the community did not rest. After counting the casualties (34 dead, 1100 wounded), binding and bandaging the wounds and burying the dead, the people continued to struggle in honor of the fallen and for the future of the living, fighting for changes in other ways.

They demanded, first, new police practices and began a systematic monitoring of police in the streets and for a while came to an uneasy informal agreement of mutual respect. Our organization Us and other community organizations organized the Community Alert Patrol (CAP) in that same year, 1965, to follow, monitor and photograph the police, teach the people their rights, and secure pro bono lawyers for those mistreated and wrongfully arrested. They demanded jobs and development monies, early education programs, teen programs and greater respect and representation in the political arena. And there was the constant threat of another revolt if the demands were not met.

Also in this period, institutions were built to facilitate and expand this process including Us, the African American Cultural Center, *Kwanzaa* and the *Nguzo Saba*, Ujima Village, Mafundi Institute, Watts Health Foundation, Kedren Community Mental Health Center, King/Drew Hospital and Medical School, the Black Congress and the Brotherhood Crusade. The people now walked with a new sense of dignity, identity, purpose and direction. And they defiantly declared their determination to free themselves and perhaps the

world, raising the battle cry, "Liberation is coming from a Black thing".

Meanwhile all over the country, revolts were being waged on the model of Watts. Watts had become an inspiration and symbol, a point in history where the Black Power phase of the Black Liberation Movement begins. To understand the meaning of this historical moment, learn its lessons and honor its legacy, we must, first, reject attempts to delegitimize the revolt by calling it a riot, an unrestrained outbreak without political aims or motivations. For it was a *revolt, a collective and open act of resistance to the established order, motivated by political aims and ideas*. We of Us defined the aims of Black revolt in Watts and elsewhere as a collective act of struggle to achieve and secure three things: *self-determination* (community control), *self-respect* (affirmation of dignity), and *self-defense* (protection against systemic violence). Indeed, we saw revolt as a fundamental and defining practice of Black Power and thus defined the Black Power Movement in the same way.

Also, we must understand the Watts Revolt was not an isolated historical event, but part of a long and continuous history of Black revolts in this country, from revolts during the Holocaust of enslavement to now. All were great sacrifices to secure a foothold of freedom for us to build on and expand in the wilderness of White oppression. Another lesson to learn from the Revolt is that there are strengths and weaknesses in spontaneous revolt and that for a revolt to turn into a

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thrust towards revolution, toward radical and far-reaching change, there must be a well-thought out philosophy and well-structured, disciplined and adaptable organization.

Finally, there is no more important lesson or legacy from the Watts Revolt than the lesson and legacy of the indispensability, unavailability and incomparable benefit of struggle. Indeed, there is no relief or remedy except in resistance; no hope or future worthy of the name except

that which is forged and founded in ongoing struggle.

THUS, WE IN US RISE EVERY DAY AND say, “it’s a good day to struggle,” well aware of the ancestors’ teaching that “every day is a donation to eternity and every hour is a contribution to the future”. The struggle, then, continues for the good of Watts, our people and the world. And we are obligated to engage and sustain it. For again, as we say in Us, “If not this, then what; and if we don’t do it, who will?”▲

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