



**THE MORAL MEANING OF OUR STRUGGLE:  
SAVING AMERICA FROM ITS TRUMPAN SELF**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**D**URING THE CIVIL RIGHTS PHASE OF THE Black Freedom Movement, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) chose as its motto: “To Save the Soul of America.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., SCLC’s principal theorist and social philosopher, explained that it was really to reaffirm that “America would never be free or saved from itself” until African Americans are freed “completely from the shackles they still wear.” He said it was a question of concern for the integrity and life of America. And as I read it, it is a question concerning the very life and death of the people of America, caught up, at that time, in a monstrously immoral war against the Vietnamese people and wasting lives and resources better spent on the well-being of the American people.

We come to this juncture which is another time and place marked, maimed, and defined by the unmitigated and unrelenting pathology of racist suppression and the unofficial and vigilante violence which undergirds it. There is gross and disabling inequity and inequalities in wealth and power, housing and healthcare, income, and education. And there is an increase in imperial militarism, environmental degradation, and disaster, and a relentlessly death dealing pandemic mocked by the president, and denied by his supporters, even as they and others around them fall ill and die unnecessary deaths.

Clearly, in the madness and misery and injustice which surround us, this is a time which calls for us, as a people, to recognize, retrieve and reaffirm our identity and obligation as a moral and social vanguard in this country and indeed the world. It is not a time for denying our identity or dismissing our duty to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place, especially among the vulnerable, voiceless, devalued, and disempowered. Indeed, it is a time to intensify our striving and struggle to defeat evil, injustice and oppression and thus, open the way for a new society. And most important, it is to open the way to a better, freer, and most

secure and promising life for the people, our people, and all people.

For there is no abstract saving of America’s soul without saving the people of America from the current and continuing oppressive system which does not serve their human interests and threatens the very well-being of the world. To save America from its Trumpian self is thus not simply to remove Trump from office, but to remove from America the views, values, practices, and structures which made and makes Trump, his enablers, and supporters possible. And as an ethical project, the struggle is not only about an election, but also about what that election seeks to do and offers beyond the process of voting and taking office.

But the voting and election is a necessary step, a vital and collective process of standing up and moving forward in a vital and transformative way. Clearly, Black people and other people who stand in long lines for hours, understand the moral meaning of this vote as part of a larger and longer struggle. And it is beautiful to see them resisting all the attempts to sideline and suppress them, to discourage their voting and silence their voice. Indeed, they not only stand in lines which are evilly and intentionally lengthened by those who would deny their rights, discourage, and defeat them. They also drive hours to reach reduced numbers of voting places, put aside other important issues and urgencies, and defiantly pursue the right and urgent need to vote, to say “no” to madness, mayhem and misery and “yes” to sanity, safety and security of person and a life of dignity, decency and promise.

Of course, neither one election nor numerous elections will bring all this to fruition as centuries of elections have demonstrated. But as part of a larger struggle for racial and social justice, it is an important practice, especially when we see how a vile and vicious man can shamelessly indulge and enrich himself at the center of American government and enshrine at every level – executive, judicial and legislative –

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views, values, practices, and structures negative to human life and relations and again the very well-being of the world.

America has no soul without its people, and there is no saving of its soul that is not rooted in and made real in the saving of its people. Likewise, there is no saving America from its Trumpian self, except through a radical reconception and reconstruction of what America means and does. And Black people, African people, have been and remain indispensable to this righteous and relentless struggle. Thus, as I argued elsewhere, it is not simply about Trump or Biden, but about our vision of a just and good society. It's not about the candidates, but about what we ourselves stand for, want for ourselves and future generations and the world. It is about taking Paul Robeson seriously that "The battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear." It is about embracing Min. Malcolm's teaching that "wherever Black people are is a battleline" and thus, taking up the Kawaida battle cry "everywhere a battleline, everyday a call to struggle." And the battlefield and battleline in electoral politics is a critical one for policy formation, resource allocation, lawmaking, judicial decisions, war or peace making, and other areas vital to social and human life and securing good in society and the world.

And this too remember, in placing voting within the larger struggle for liberation, justice, human good and the well-being of the world, we also honor the legacy of our ancestors who fought on this battlefield before us to win this right and expand the realm of freedom, justice and good in this society and the world. And the honoring of that legacy is not simply to vote, but to envision, re-envision and reconstruct this so-

ciety in liberated and liberating ways that expand its conception of itself and its soul. This means that we not only vote, but vote for a vision which will not be realized fully or even mostly in this or another election, but in the radically transformative struggle we wage for a new society and world. And it also means that we vote for the realignment of forces and the creation of space more favorable to the continued pursuit of our vision after the election.

But again, it is our obligation to be serious about our souls and ourselves which unavoidably links salvation with liberation. In other words, we must seek a concrete freedom from domination, deprivation and degradation imposed by systemic racism and racialized capitalism. And this concept of freedom requires, not only *freedom from* oppression, but also *freedom to* live good and meaningful lives, flourish and come into the fullness of ourselves.

**A**ND FINALLY, OUR ANCESTORS TAUGHT US to see ourselves and our interests in both particular and world-encompassing ways and to understand and honor the expansive moral meaning of our struggle. Indeed, Anna Julia Cooper taught us that we must "take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritism, whether of sex, race, country or condition." Thus, as Mary McLeod Bethune taught us, we must remember that whether in voting or waging struggles on a thousand other small and large battlefields, "Our task is to remake the world. It is nothing less than this." But like all great tasks and journeys, this task begins with smaller steps and initiatives which together complete and give substance to the whole.▲

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