



**RED-FLAGGING AND SACRIFICING RANGEL:
HYPOCRISY AND HURRAH IN THE HOUSE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

There is something repulsively hypocritical and self-servingly wrong in the way Congress conducted its business in the matter of censuring the Hon. Charles B. Rangel (D) of Harlem. It was, first, a question of giving priority attention to a less urgent matter in the midst of national crisis. It was like a pilot and co-pilot, having lost an engine, carrying on a conversation about breath mints to hide the odor of alcohol and having on appropriate attire, while they are searching for a safe place to land. In other words, they are concerned about how they will smell and look when they land, rather than focusing on the problematic of landing itself.

The issues of unemployment and unemployment compensation, improving education, housing for the homeless, relief for home owners, tax relief for the unrich and tax responsibility for the rich, restraint on the corporate plunder of the economy and the environment, green energy development, poverty reduction and the work of peace, and a host of other urgent matters are said to be almost impossible to resolve. But by some strange miracle, Congress was able to manufacture the “moral strength” to raise the red flag of imminent ethical danger and decline in the House and target and censure Rep. Rangel. It was a kind of last hurrah for a lame-duck Congress, limping to season’s end with a trophy trial as a substitute for substantive action on more serious social ethical issues.

The argument was that it is a question of keeping a promise made to the American people to clean Congress up from the corruption in which the Republicans had drenched and almost drowned it. But the Democrats chose as their stellar examples, not Republicans, but two of their own, who not only have long-term distinguished

records, but also, as it is the current custom to say, “just happened to be Black”. No “usual suspects” here intended. It’s just the way history and happenstance unfolded, we are sure to be told, if we dare question the curious coincidence concerning the choice of Rep. Rangel and the Hon. Maxine Waters (D), Los Angeles for these ethical test-and-show trials.

Who can argue against establishing and observing rules which must be followed or against imposing sanctions on offending members? But the *selective morality* practiced here is unjust, irrational and unworthy of respect. For it is about empty posturing for the people, pandering to the Republicans, the identity of the selectively accused, and the precedent-setting severity of the sanction in the face of an alternative, more appropriate and lesser one.

Indeed, the last time any member was censured was in 1983 when two members had sex with seventeen-year old pages. Rep. Rangel’s offenses, most often mentioned, were improper solicitation of charitable funds for a university center in his name using government stationery, unpaid taxes, and incorrect reporting of income which he conceded. As one of his conservative defenders noted, the case offered against him revealed “no activity involving moral turpitude or any activity that could be classified as one with criminal intent.” A voice vote on an amendment to reduce the sanction to reprimand was temporarily won, but when a recorded vote was demanded, the majority of Democrats bucked, flip-flopped and went along with the illusion of ethical urgency to censure. Speaker Nancy Pelosi acquiesced to the censure, even if she didn’t openly support it, letting loose her lieutenants, Reps. Anna Eshou, Steve Israel and George Miller to aggressively make the case.

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The Congressional Black Caucus, except for the predictable post-racial gentleman from Alabama, Rep. Artur Davis, made a united-front and strong case for fairness and a sanction of reprimand, arguing cogently that censure did not fit the circumstance nor follow historical practice. But Speaker Pelosi, weak from challenge to her position as speaker, wanted to show female muscle to the White male red-meat club and sacrificed Rep. Rangel in the process. Again, it is a curious coincidence that Black people have again become in this case, the paradigm, poster “child”, and ugly face of America’s flaws and failures. And please don’t blame history on me for introducing race in the conversation. It was already in U.S. history and the House when Rep. Rangel and his questionable case arrived there.

Rep. Rangel stated in his closing speech that the House used “new criteria” for his censure and that it was more a case of political considerations and appearances than a real concern for ethics. As noted above, it was a moment of manufactured moral muscularity absent on larger social ethical issues. This also makes this minor morality scene, played out with palpable hypocrisy and exaggerated seriousness, a clear mockery. For it reduces the discussion of ethical issues to personal behavior, focusing the country’s attention and anger on persons rather than policies, on violations of protocol and procedure rather than Congress’ ethical culpability thru wrongful action or inaction on issues of life and death, economic and social justice, civil and human rights, and the right of everyone to a life of dignity and decency.

And so, there stood Representative Charles B. Rangel, Democrat, son of Harlem, dean of the Congressional Black Caucus, dean of New York politicians, elder statesman, former chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, public servant of 40 years, 20 terms, and in his 21st term, decorated Korean War Veteran in a time of wars, still outweighed by the burden of society’s history, outranked and rendered most sacrificeable by the political demands of the moment.

Fortunately for Rep. Rangel, when the whole of his record is read, his work and achievements for the country and the people of Harlem, Haiti, Cuba and other African peoples in the world will endure in spite of this moment of trial and testing. As he said in his closing statement, “I know in my heart I’m not going to be judged by this Congress. I’m going to be judged by my life, my activities, my contributions to society and I just apologize for the awkward position some of you are in.”

That awkward position was one of gross hypocrisy and pathetic hurrah, lame-ducking and dodging responsibility for larger and more important social and ethical issues. It was about making a mountain of moral concern out of a mole hill of misdemeanors and calling for the severity of censure when a reasonable reprimand would have sufficed. And it was an awkwardness born of the silent knowledge that similar Congressional members’ flaws exist unannounced and in great number and that this precedent will not go unremembered in other forums and fields of history and struggle.

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th Edition, www.MaulanaKarenga.org.