



## TAKING DOWN FLAGS AND TEARING DOWN WALLS: SOME SERIOUSLY NEEDED DISTINCTIONS

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**I**T IS important to assert at the outset, in the interest of seriously needed distinctions, that a single symbolic act of taking down a confederate flag is not *the same* as or a *substitute* for tearing down the walls of White supremacy *for which it stands*. Taking down the confederate flag, like the Obama election, clearly has its symbolic value, and also like the Obama election, it can give us a rightful sense of satisfaction and victory, and then leave us with little else. For the moment did not lead to building a movement, and the single act assumed a separate meaning in and of itself. The election became, like the removal of the flag could become, the end rather than a means to further and complete the long and costly struggle for racial and social justice.

Indeed, this symbolic act could end up, like the Obama election, benefitting others more than us and being peddled by the established order as: a substitute for serious substantive change; a sign and wonder of Southern redemption from the sin and savagery of racism; and self-congratulatory evidence of a country moving in earnest beyond its White supremacist past and similar present. Also it provides the lulling illusion and Hollywoodish imagery of moving forward while standing still in places and spaces where it matters, i.e., in areas of wealth, power and status. Furthermore, it should be noticed that the confederate flag, not racism, is now the prompt for discussion about the South and American society. The discussion of the flag minimizes the real problem of racism so that it seems it can be easily solved by simply taking the flag down. But engaging racism, seriously, means tearing down racial walls of grossly unequal wealth, power and status that the flag symbolizes, celebrates and reaffirms.

Moreover, the media conversation has shifted from lowering the flag to what this means for candidates, parties, and ultimately

elections. And in the midst of this, our real interests are overlooked, lost or rendered satisfied and no longer relevant. Indeed, if history is any judge, the conversation will be diverted from what people are doing to us to what we are allegedly doing to ourselves that facilitates or even justifies our treatment and oppression. So, soon someone will be sent, *if they are not already among us*, to lecture us on internal reasons for our continued oppression, police and vigilante violence against us, the racial gap in wealth and power, and the degraded status we seem unable to escape or righteously improve, even when we deny our identity and sacrifice our dignity to appease, accommodate or just be accepted.

But now, what is to be decided and done, now that the funerals and eulogies have been completed, the flags lowered, strangely folded respectfully and placed in museums of revised memory and the trash bins of a brutal and bloody history? Who is to raise the critical question about not just the South, but also about American society as a whole which has certainly not changed its oppressive and wicked ways of “whiteness”, simply by taking down a flag symbolizing racial hate, savage violence, racist terrorism and undeniable treason?

There is no one with a modicum of sense or sanity, honesty or intelligence who could deny that the confederate flag was always a symbol and reaffirmation of commitment to enslavement and oppression and racial segregation and racist terrorism, regardless of the unsuccessful attempts to cover it with conversations using less self-indicting language. And it is a telling self-indictment of American society for *complicity and consent* that it would exonerate its White brothers and sisters from the crime of treason; reintegrate even the unrepentant into the national government; embrace and honor their symbols and heroes

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even in the capital and military buildings and grounds; and allow them to return to modified forms of enslavement, segregation and racial savagery of innumerable kinds against Black people and other peoples of color. And we miss the mark if we fail to see and engage this racial and racist reality.

Dr. Martin Luther King's comments in his eulogy for the four martyred little Black girls, brutally killed in a racist bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, September 15, 1963, called attention to the fact that "these children—unoffending, innocent and beautiful—were victims of one of the most vicious, heinous crimes ever perpetrated against humanity". And the racist massacre of the nine innocent martyrs at Emanuel AME in Charleston, S.C., who were equally innocent, unoffending and beautiful, was also a heinous crime against our people and humanity.

Dr. King goes on to say that "Yet they died nobly. They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity. So they have something to say to us in their death". Indeed, "They have something to say to every minister who has remained silent behind the safe security of stain glass windows"; to "every politician who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism", and to "a federal government that has compromised with undemocratic practices of Southern dixiecrats and the blatant hypocrisy of right-wing northern Republicans". And "They have something to say to every (Black person) who passively accepts the evil system of segregation and stands on the sidelines in the midst of a mighty struggle for justice".

Finally, Dr. King asks each and all of us—African Americans, Native Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans and Eu-

ro-Americans—to hear the voice of the martyrs, saying to us "that we must substitute courage for caution" and especially "that we must be concerned not merely about *who* murdered them, but about the system, the way of life and the philosophy which *produced* the murderers". Min Malcolm X had taught us before a similar lesson of seeing and confronting the American system as a whole, saying, "America is Mississippi. There is no such thing as a Mason-Dixon Line" (dividing North and South). It's (all) America. If one room in your house is dirty, you got a dirty house. The entire house is under your jurisdiction". And thus, it is your responsibility to clean up the whole house.

As Dr. King and Min. Malcolm both taught, we are not to take substitutes for real freedom, justice and equity. Indeed, all the martyred mothers and daughters, fathers and sons say to us: don't accept air sandwiches for the food of a dignified and decent life; or the flood of flowery words for the healing water of an actual liberating way forward. And don't accept or mistake taking down a flag for tearing down the walls of oppression over which the flag flew and still flies; over which militarized police and vigilantes, drones and other dreadful things hover; and over which a ruthless and self-righteous racial and corporate class still rules.

**F**INALLY, our martyrs and all our ancestors say to us: "Continue the struggle. Keep the faith. Hold the line. Love and respect our people and each other. Seek and speak truth. Do and demand justice. Be constantly concerned with the well-being of the world and all in it. And rebuild a righteous Movement which prefigures and makes possible the good world we all want and deserve, and work and struggle to bring into being".

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