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African Americans, Social Justice, and the Aftermath of September 11, 2001

By Rod Bush

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During World War I the great African American scholar-activist and NAACP leader W.E.B. Du Bois called on us to “forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens...” (*Dusk of Dawn*, 254). For Du Bois, who had long been locked in a fierce debate against the accommodationist approach of Mr. Booker T. Washington, this was no easy statement to make. He felt the contradictions deeply. He expresses them eloquently: “But what of our wrongs, cry a million voices with strained faces and bitter eyes.” His answer: “Our wrongs are still wrong. War does not excuse disenfranchisement... but it does make our first duty clear... We will not bargain with our loyalty.” (*Dusk of Dawn*, 254).

This seems to close the case. How could we, any of us, with this example of patriotism by one much more aggrieved than we, fail to follow the principle set during World War I when African Americans were beset by lynching, pogroms, Jim Crow, and the like? How could we, after all of the progress we have made, question the need for a similar declaration of loyalty to our fellow citizens in the face of such a heinous and murderous provocation?

These are not easy questions to address clearly. Du Bois understood this. He admitted he was having difficulty thinking clearly. He was opposed to war, but “In the midst of arms not only laws but ideals are silent.” (*Dusk of Dawn*, 252).

But can we really call Du Bois’s Close Ranks editorial a stirring example of patriotism?

The answer is unequivocal. For the visionary but pragmatic Du Bois this was an act of realpolitik. Even a casual reading of his chapter on “The Propaganda of War” in *Dusk of Dawn* clearly reveals this.

Dr. Vincent Harding, commenting on this situation, tells us that African Americans have always been critical of America's wars. But once the war is underway Blacks had to face the harsh realities of the government's power to conscript their sons and fathers, to imprison dissenters, to harass all opposition, and to offer rewards bathed in the sweet perfume of patriotism to all who conformed their actions and words to the needs of the white world (Bush, 1999: 81f).

But Du Bois would say later that he was less sure of the soundness of that attitude. He argued that he was thinking narrowly in the interest of his group, "and was willing to let the world go to hell, if the black man went free" (Dusk of Dawn, 255).

The Du Bois who said these words had evolved to the height of his intellectual powers. This is the Du Bois who with Paul Robeson established an anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and egalitarian stand which would be carried forward into our time first by Brother Malcolm X and then with equal fervor but a wider scope by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Indeed it is the post-Malcolm vision which stands as Dr. King's Dream, the true estimate of a renewed American Dream, a profound dream of peace, justice, and equality for all. And he undoubtedly meant all. This earned Dr. King the disfavor of the more moderate civil rights leadership who preferred a more pragmatic approach which used America's concern about its image to gain concessions, but did not step outside the bounds of what was to be a national consensus about closing ranks around the so-called "national interests."

The civil rights and Black Power movements had a profound impact on American Society. They were the heart of what intellectuals and activists often refer to as the Second Reconstruction. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society was essentially a grand social experiment which was rooted in the civil rights movement, and given urgency by the urban rebellions and Black Power movement which followed the victory of the civil rights movement over Jim Crow segregation.

The challenge of the Black rebellion forced the nation to face its past. Given that the nation was in the midst of an unprecedented economic expansion with no end in sight, Johnson seized the time to establish his legacy by initiating a war against poverty, which he thought would lead to the Great Society. But the U.S. was also faced by another challenge, the rebellion of the poor of the third world against white western domination, most notably in Vietnam. Strictly speaking this was not a U.S. problem, but then we

must analyze fully the geopolitical and geocultural phenomenon known as North-South relations. The Great Society was brought low by its attempt to quell the rebellion in Vietnam.

We will analyze later the elements of a global realignment implied here, but we should not lose the implications of Martin Luther King's statement in this context that we must side with the barefoot people of the world. And with regard to the so-called war against terrorism, we should not forget that Dr. King called the U.S. government itself the world's greatest perpetrator of violence. This is no less true today than it was in 1967 when he spoke those words.

But the Great Society was a program of domestic social democracy designed to extend the benefits of the New Deal to people of color. The New Deal had been a massive program of social uplift; one might call it an affirmative action program for the working class. But the benefits went mainly to whites. The white middle class suburbs were created through highway subsidies and low interest housing loans which explicitly excluded Blacks and other people of color.

The civil rights movement sought to address this continued exclusion from the benefits of American society, especially in the South where Blacks were segregated by law. The post-World War II setting in which this movement came to the fore was one in which American power reigned supreme in the political, economic, military, and cultural spheres. While the U.S. had been in a battle with Germany for the hegemonic position within the world-system from the time of World War I, the final victory required changes in our internal social dynamics, which would result in a guarantee of the social peace. This involved the repression of the Left, and a readymade ideological mechanism by which the social peace would be maintained. The result was a set of practices which guaranteed individual liberty but repressed political difference (anti-Communism or McCarthyism).

But the geopolitical situation of the postwar period was not so simple as this. Indeed in some sense the modern civil rights movement was a product of the post-World War II world. In the international arena, movements for national liberation were prominent in every part of the formerly colonized world, i.e. Indochina, India, China, Africa. Thus the civil rights movement was born during a period of worldwide Decolonization. In this period the British, French, and Dutch empires collapsed and new nations emerged

composed of people of color. In order to be able to influence these new nations, the U.S. had to eliminate its official sanction of segregation and adopt a posture of support for civil rights. African Americans were aware of the Decolonization movements in the third world, and many came to interpret these events as a sign of the increasing vulnerability of white power, not only in the wider world, but at home.

The collapse of the European empires corresponded with the notion of the inevitable rise of the dark world, which was a part of the folklore of the Black working class communities from which Malcolm Little had come. So during this time of the flowering of the civil rights movement, Malcolm X was saying that we had arrived at the end of white world supremacy. While the civil rights movement drew inspiration from the challenge to the white world, they did not develop a position so frankly oppositional as Malcolm X and the Black nationalists. They hoped that their movement might lead to the redemption of America.

The major campaigns of the civil rights movement, from the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the voter registration drives of 1963 and 1964, were aimed at forcing the U.S. social system to live up to its own ideology of equality for all under the law. The overall goal of the movement was to integrate Blacks into the existing system, to destroy caste barriers, and to afford basic civil rights to all Americans. Initially the movement did not question the structure and goals of the system itself. It was during this period that the movement enjoyed the greatest support of whites in terms of money, the media, personnel, and the government. This was the classic civil rights movement, which simply called upon the United States to live up to its ideology.

After 1965, equal employment, access to trade unions, Affirmative Action, and fair housing became the goals of the civil rights movement. These goals called for a redistribution of wealth and services, changes in the functioning of institutions, and changes in the North as well. It was during this period that much of the support of white liberals was withdrawn. At the same time, there were fundamental challenges to American society concerning its values, its violent history, its hypocritical self-image, its role in world affairs, and its economic structure, which was said to generate exploitation at home and dependence abroad.

The views of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came increasingly to resemble those of Malcolm X. Malcolm was arguing for a coalition between the radicals in the civil rights

movement, Black nationalists in the U.S., and revolutionaries in the three continents. As Malcolm moved actively and aggressively to create such coalitions, he was assassinated by forces in league with the conservative leadership of the Nation of Islam, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Central Intelligence Agency.

To understand the reasoning behind the extreme measures taken by the U.S. government against Malcolm X, and later Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Panther Party, we should review some other aspects of the geopolitical situation within which the civil rights movement came to the fore.

The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 had installed a regime which had been a decisive factor in defeating the fascists, and its military sphere had expanded into Central Europe after 1945. This was an element in a larger issue, the rise of a world communist movement. Communist Parties had played important roles in the resistance to fascism throughout Europe. While this had brought them to power in some of the East European countries (with more or less help from the Red Army), strong Communist Parties now also existed in some West European countries, and appeared to be in a position to challenge the capitalist parties.

While the U.S.S.R. was viewed as the center of a world socialist movement organizing for a worldwide proletarian uprising, it also proclaimed itself the natural ally of the national liberation movements. This claim flowed from its socialist and anti-imperialist ideology, but its more solid grounding was that the Soviet Bloc consisted primarily of semi-peripheral states which had been victims of semi-colonial or neo-colonial domination. There was thus a combination of fears driving the U.S. in this period. There was the possible ideological appeal to a rebellious working class, or to a left and cosmopolitan intelligentsia and to the left-outs, some of whom identified with allied forces in the third world that America was attempting to pursue.

So when Malcolm X argued that the Black Freedom struggle was a component of the world struggle against capitalism and imperialism, it was J. Edgar Hoover's and the U.S. ruling establishment's worst nightmare. When Malcolm X successfully drew Martin Luther King, Jr. into an alliance with him, this all but signed a death warrant for both of them.

While Black leaders had long criticized U.S. foreign policy (since its role in the cold war brought it into opposition to the aspirations of people of color in Africa and elsewhere), over time many Black leaders muted their criticism, especially in view of McCarthyism. Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Shirley Graham were among the few who consistently opposed U.S. foreign policy, at great price. All these leaders were both pro-socialist and anti-imperialist. After the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, in which the poorly armed Vietnamese decisively defeated the French Army, Paul Robeson published an article entitled “Ho Chi Minh: the Toussaint L’Ouverture of Indochina.” In this article Robeson not only compared Ho Chi Minh to the famous leader of the Haitian slave revolt, but warned of Eisenhower’s threat to send Americans to Vietnam to protect the tin, rubber, and tungsten of southeast Asia for the “free world.”

Du Bois criticized the alleged anti-colonial role of the U.S. as a new type of colonialism. In 1950 Du Bois ran for the U.S. Senate in New York on the American Labor Party ticket. In his campaign he was very critical of the anti-communist policies of both the Republican and the Democratic parties. On February 8, 1951 the Truman administration indicted Du Bois for allegedly being an agent of a foreign power in his work with the Peace Information Center in New York. The 82-year-old Du Bois was handcuffed and fingerprinted and treated by the press like a common criminal. In November 1951 a federal judge dismissed the case because the federal government did not submit one shred of evidence to substantiate its claim.

While traditional Black criticism of U.S. foreign policy waned during this repressive period, the black protest leaders used the U.S.’s sensitivity about its image as leader of the “free world,” to put pressure on the U.S. to make certain concessions to Blacks. This was precisely the tack of the early 1940s March on Washington Movement (MOWM) led by A. Philip Randolph, which threatened a March on Washington to expose the hypocrisy of the U.S. fighting for democracy in Europe when Blacks were prohibited from working in defense industries right here in the U.S. This more pragmatic stance was the model for the modern civil rights movement. From 1944 to 1950 Black initiatives led to several concessions by the executive and judicial branches of the federal government. The white primaries were struck down in the courts, President Truman formed the first presidential civil rights commission, segregation in interstate bus travel was outlawed, segregation in the Army was attacked, literacy tests for voting were declared unconstitutional, border states began token desegregation of graduate schools, desegregation of dining cars, etc.

This was the context in which the NAACP initiated a full-fledged attack on the principle of separate but equal. But the price that Black leaders paid for these gains was either to soft-pedal their opposition to U.S. foreign policy, or to outright oppose those like Robeson, Graham, and Du Bois who stood up for the indivisibility of the anti-colonial struggles in the third world and the black struggle for freedom, justice, and equality here in the U.S.

The scourge of McCarthyism was to nearly wipe the memory of these central characters from African American and American life. But Malcolm was to revive their vision, more vividly and closer to the grassroots. Malcolm's contentions that we were not a minority but a majority of the have-nots in the world, and that our struggle should be for our God-given human rights instead of civil rights which Uncle Sam could grant or deny at his discretion, were examples of how he illuminated the landscapes of an entire generation of intellectuals, activists, and people at the grassroots. Quickly the recognition began to sink in at the highest levels of the U.S. government. Daniel Patrick Moynihan compared the Black revolt to the Chinese communists, noting that the Black Muslim movement indicated the near total alienation of segments of the African American population from the United States. Others of the U.S. elite compared the Black revolt to the NLF in Vietnam.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover had decided in 1963 that the civil rights movement was the leading edge of a social revolution in the United States. He set out at that time to destroy the movement. We should note that Hoover often used the danger of violence as a justification of his hunting for communists in the civil rights movement, and his concern about communist influence as an excuse for his surveillance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders. But his 1963 decision to destroy the movement preceded any of the major urban rebellions that rocked the nation's cities from 1964 to 1971.

Hoover and the elites that he represented were concerned about the violence, but this violence was not a product of the activity of the civil rights movement per se; they were both a part of the Zeitgeist. Hoover feared that the democratic and egalitarian spirit of the civil rights movement would become contagious, pushing other groups to make similar claims, thereby overwhelming the ruling consensus which justified inequality by imputing inferiority, lack of initiative, and lack of human capital to groups that were

culturally outside the social, political, and economic mainstream. Violence was simply a symptom of loss of control, and of a nearly total lack of legitimacy.

While Hoover called for an all-out attempt to block the rise of a messiah who could unify the Black nationalist “hate groups,” his main intent most certainly was to prevent the unification of the disparate members of the working class and excluded groups who would then pursue an egalitarian agenda vis-à-vis the elites of the United States.

A major component of the restructuring of the capitalist world-system between 1945 and 1990 was the transnational expansion of U.S. capital. The capital migration of this period was a response to the class and social conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s which further strengthened the bargaining power of the U.S. labor force (which dated originally from the militant labor struggles of the 1930s [see Arrighi and Silver, 1984]).

In the 1970s the deepening economic crisis intensified competition among the various segments of the labor force. During the unprecedented expansion of the 1960s, there seemed to be room to bring more and more people into the labor force. In this situation concessions could be made to the African American population, which had mounted a ferocious attack on the citadels of power, including militant protest and violent rebellion. During this period Blacks were admitted to sections of the labor force which had heretofore been closed to them. But Black people’s history as a labor force in the United States had lent a certain intensity to their perception of social relations within the world of work. They thus made demands for treatment which others thought extreme, or touchy. Militant caucuses and radical worker organizations were formed all over the country.

Given that this new group of militant and radical workers entered the labor force at a time when this force was rapidly expanding, their militancy was underscored by a tight labor market. This combination of labor market factors led, in capital’s view, to an alarming lack of labor discipline. As the profitability of capitalist enterprises themselves began to be squeezed, they sought cheaper and more malleable workforces outside the core zones. They also manipulated immigration laws to allow for an influx of immigrant laborers who were not citizens, and some of whom were not documented. At the same time they mounted an intense ideological attack on the labor force, targeting their unreliability, lack of discipline, and lack of a work ethic in comparison with the leaner work forces of the periphery. This ideological campaign against a “fat cat working class”

was complemented by a subterranean campaign designed to justify the wholesale dismissal of the militant Black and Latino working class from the workforce. A third and most intense component of this ideological attack focused on the marginal sectors of the working class, who were subjected to long term or “structural” unemployment but were entitled to the dregs of the welfare state, such as AFDC. This moral critique against the poor became the center of the conservatives’ Southern strategy, a mean-spirited, cold-blooded, and cynical strategy of mounting a racialized attack on the disadvantaged via a color-blind form of racism designed to undercut any sense of human solidarity with the most disadvantaged segments of our population.

In addition, given the gains of the civil rights movement, room had been created for a significantly enlarged Black middle class, which formed the basis for a move to the right among the major civil rights organizations, and also the development of a conservative segment of the Black body politic to the right of the liberal civil rights establishment. The new Black and Latino conservatives would play a useful role in the class warfare waged against the poor by those seeking to recapture the white republic of old, but this time with a large number of honorary whites—a groveling and morally debased group who genuflected to the moral poverty of the elite—and their spiritually impoverished followers who often masqueraded in religious disguise.

But overall the central theme of this era was the crisis of U.S. hegemony represented by the military and political challenge in Vietnam, and spearheaded by the increasing competitiveness of Japanese and German enterprises vis-à-vis U.S. enterprises. The global liberalism of the post-World War II era was no longer adequate; the political and economic elite sought a way to reverse the declining fortunes of the U.S. Eventually the backlash started in the 1970s.

The conservatism of the Reagan-Bush years was a reaction to the challenges of the 1960s and 1970s, a reaction to the revolution of 1968. Too often this period is viewed as simply a society-wide revulsion to the extremes of the New Left. In the U.S. the prototypical organizations of the New Left included Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Black Panther Party. Yet the New Left was much more complicated. The stories of this period generally identify the decline of the New Left with the decline of these two organizations. But in actuality their decline led to a proliferation of organizations, forming a movement which defined itself as operating within the same tradition, but as having learned from its predecessors’ errors.

If the New Left organizations brandished the weapon of ungovernability, the Left Leninists and revolutionary nationalists who took up their banner represented an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy. For this stratum of activists entered into the culture of the professional revolutionaries that arose from Leninism in the USSR and from revolutionary movements throughout the capitalist world. These revolutionaries were preparing for the long march, viewed as a protracted struggle to defeat capitalism. Many knew that they would not personally live to see the victory of the people, but were convinced that through their struggle they would contribute to an alteration in the relations of force which would eventually cumulate to such an extent that the people would finally be able to overthrow the rule of capital. I emphasize here that this had nothing to do with violent revolution but was about the power of the people being organized materially and morally as an irresistible force.

But this force was to decline in the face of a withering counter-offensive, a massive counterinsurgency using violence, fraud, and dirty tricks to prevent the rise of a movement which not only challenged the prerogatives of the powerful, but sought to undo their power altogether so as to make possible a truly democratic world.

Where does that leave us with regard to September 11?

The moral of this story may not be obvious, so let me elaborate. Just as the racialization of inequality has served as a means to stabilize oppression in America, so the resistance of oppressed people of color has served as the strongest challenge to the structural inequality of the pan-European world-system. We are all a part of the system, as Malcolm X began to realize just before he was murdered. Following Malcolm X, Martin Luther King understood it completely and called for us to side with the barefoot people of the earth, to redistribute power and wealth to the billions of people who were victims of America's power. This is not a threat to the American people, but an opportunity, which many began to see. But anytime we begin to mobilize our people, anytime a people begins to mobilize to oppose the fundamental inequities of the system, there is danger that it could get out of control.

The extent of popular support for the struggle against racial profiling, the growing popularity of the demand for reparations for slavery, the unity demonstrated at the World Conference Against Racism, and the popularity of the struggle for a global democracy were signs that the oppressed and their allies were standing up and more

and more people were seeing the righteousness of these struggles. We are in the midst of what Dr. Howard Winant calls a global realignment, what we in the Black community have spoken of for at least a century as the rise of the dark world, what Malcolm X hailed prematurely in 1963 as the end of white world supremacy. But the end of world white supremacy is surely coming, and this is a righteous cause not only for people of color but for all of us.

All of these struggles served to undermine the sense of rightness that many white Americans have about their nation's world position and social role. Most Americans have little awareness about the global use of U.S. power. Playthell Benjamin tells us "between 1890 and 1932 the U.S. military intervened in the affairs of third world countries 45 times, and since 1945 the U.S has conducted 20 armed interventions into the affairs of other countries, all in support of anti-democratic forces." Dr. Gerald Horne argued that "white Americans have promoted a policy of democratic institutions for themselves, quasi-fascism for African Americans, and fascism for third world countries."

But when the privileged begin to hear the cries of the oppressed and to learn their wisdom, this is an ominous sign for a relatively small group of truly wealthy and powerful people who benefit most from the way things are. This is what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. demanded of us. This is the legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Cyril Briggs, John Brown, Frederick Douglass, Paul Robeson, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Langston Hughes, Huey P. Newton and many more. If our leaders save for Congresswoman Barbara Lee are having trouble stepping into these shoes, then we will have to move ahead of them.

This is not a simple struggle but a complicated one. The privileged among the third world and in the third world within (from a U.S. perspective) are often allies of the elites of the western capitalist world, who participate in maintaining the subaltern position of their "own people." But there are often contradictions among these forces, with some wishing to build their power separate from their powerful allies. In the case of Osama bin Laden we have a classic case of reactionary elites who are opposed to Western domination, but have been built up and empowered through their partnership with Western imperialism in the cold war.

The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by forces who have long been allies and tools of U.S. world hegemony is a signal that U.S. hegemony is in irrevocable

decline. This fearful, catastrophic, and terrible calamity has put most of us into a myopic siege mentality because we occupy the same territory as our elite, and an attack on that territory is an attack on all of us. This is the logic of geopolitical contention that we must unravel if we are to deal successfully with the crisis of our time, which is not so much the attack on the World Trade Center, or the attack on the U.S. homeland, as the struggle against a social system which degrades and subordinates 85 percent of the world's population and affords a heaven on earth for about one percent.

Those who preside over and partake of the privileges of empire have launched a global war against terrorism in response to this attack. This cannot and will not be a solution to the threat. It will only compound the mostly justified anti-Americanism around the world. And our task, brothers and sisters, is to become partners in the world struggle against international social injustice. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. demanded of us, we should be about bringing it down and helping to create a more just, egalitarian, and democratic world.

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