



**PATRIOTISM, FLAGS AND PLAYING FIELDS:  
UNHINGING TRUMP AND UNSETTLING AMERICA**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**I**T IS CLEARLY AN IRONY OF HISTORY THAT such serious subjects as race and racism would find a place of protest and resistance on the playing fields of America, sites of entertainment and distraction from the pressing problems of society and the world. But if we are rightfully attentive to history as Malcolm, our honored teacher, taught us to be, then we know that this is not new. For Colin Kaepernick and other Black NFL players that joined him in solidarity belong to a larger *culture of struggle* which precedes and makes them possible. It is a righteous and relentless struggle for freedom, justice, equality of life and living, and other human rights and goods of society and the world. And even if the ongoing struggle we wage as a people, with or without allies, is temporarily suppressed or forced underground, it will eventually rise, reaffirm itself and roar again.

Indeed, the current protests and demonstrations of dissent and resistance are continuing the tradition of entertainers, artists, athletes and other celebrities who recognized there is no safe, exempt or really comfortable place in oppression; and that big money and bright lights don't heal dignity-denying wounds, provide insurance against insult, injustice and racial violence, or end worries about loved ones returning home safe, alive and well. For in a context of oppression, the whole people are suspect and vulnerable to violence, domination, deprivation and degradation of various kinds.

And thus, this means joining the struggle to radically change America from the vantage point at which we find ourselves. For as Paul Robeson, singer, author, intellectual and former athlete, stood up and told the artists, writers, intellectuals and the celebrities of the world in the midst of another rising fascism, "the battlefield is everywhere; there is no sheltered rear". So, again, it is good to revolt, right to rebel and morally compelling to resist in the face of evil, injustice and oppression any and everywhere. And thus, it is righteous resistance to stand up, sit down, kneel, lock arms, speak out, refuse to appear or partici-

pate or engage in any other demonstration of dissent and refusal to accept being silenced, set aside or denied human rights.

At a White raw-meat rally in Alabama, Trump, who on infrequent occasions pretends to be President, became unhinged again and lashed out against Colin Kaepernick and other NFL players who have demonstrated against police violence and racist and racialized treatment of Black people in this country by refusing to stand for the national anthem. Returning to his old role on the *Apprentice*, he called the resisting players SOB's and said they should be fired for their rightful demonstration of dissent against a system, that through public policy, judicial rulings and socially-sanctioned practice, demonstrates and condones continuing disregard for Black life and Black people. He also disinvited a player and team that had already decided not to come to the White House to avoid linking themselves with him and the policies he stands for and fights to implement.

Not to be bullied or cowered by an unhinged President, NFL players responded by joining in the struggle, kneeling, linking arms, sitting down, staying off the field, and producing the largest number of demonstrations during the playing of the anthem that the league has ever experienced in its history. Always looking for an easy and unprincipled way out and way to win, Trump tried to reframe the issue of demonstrating against police violence and systemic racism, he declared "This has nothing to do with race or anything else. This has to do with respect for our country and our flag". Later on, not leaving any stone unthrown in his war of words, he adds respect for our fighting forces - making a leap of illogic only someone sympathetic and similarly wired could understand and embrace.

Clearly, there are several things wrong with this distorted and dishonest picture and pathetic patriotic posturing. Only abysmal ignorance, willful self-deception and a penchant for public lying would allow someone to claim acts of resistance against racism have nothing to do with

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race. Trump and his supporters are trying to peddle a patriotism void of any reason for us to accept and embrace it. It is a patriotism that would compel us to endorse and be silent about our own oppression and the oppression of others; unjust wars and warmongering; apartheid walls in this country and elsewhere; brutal occupations of other peoples' land and ruthless robbery of their resources; anti-labor policies; racial, religious and national origins immigration bans and mistreatment; denial of health care to millions to further enrich the wealthy; and denial and failure to act to halt further climate change and human degradation and destruction of the earth; as well as other such immoral and inhuman policies and proposals negative to human good and the well-being of the world.

And it is a patriotism that commands us to be grateful for living in a country that claims to be a democracy without our receiving the benefits the system is supposed to deliver. This is the reason Malcolm dismissed American democracy as a social fraud and moral failure, declaring that African Americans are not beneficiaries of America's racialized democracy, but rather "victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy". And thus, neither he nor his people are obligated to respect such a system in this oppressive and racist form. Therefore, he said in one of his lectures to his people and America, "So, I am not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag saluter, or a flag waver - no, not I. I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream. I see an American nightmare".

There are several things important to keep in mind in this unfolding discourse and resistance

around race and racism. The first is to keep it within our history of struggle, avoiding tendencies to dilute it with artificial Americana claims of premature unity not born of honest and earnest struggle and real and radical change in relations of wealth, power and status (equal respect). Also, we must keep it within the arc of our freedom and social and racial justice struggle, so that we don't find ourselves suffering historical amnesia, practicing episodic engagement and forgetting those who struggled before from this particular field and related ones of engagement as well as those in the larger struggle.

Fannie Lou Hamer, honored human rights activist, taught us we are "never to forget where we came from and always praise the bridges that carried us over." And this means all the bridges, not just the athletes, artists and other entertainers, but we can focus here on them and not forget relief for Colin Kaepernick who initiated this new wave of resistance on the playing field.

**F**inally, Mary McLeod Bethune, honored activist educator, tells us that democracy for her and her people is not a finished product, but "a goal towards which our nation is marching". Indeed, she said, "Perhaps the greatest battle is before us, the fight for a new America, fearless, free, united (and) morally rearmed" in which Black people and other Americans strive mightily as midwives of history to bring to America "a new birth of freedom", a real government of all the people, for all the people and by all the people. But in all this, let us remember the counsel of Amilcar Cabral, honored revolutionary theorist and practitioner, that in this difficult and demanding struggle, we should "mask no difficulties, tell no lies and claim no easy victories".

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Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair 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*, *The Message and Meaning of Kwanzaa: Bringing Good Into the World* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, [ww.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org](http://ww.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org); [ww.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://ww.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org); [www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org).