



**MARCHING ON WASHINGTON, A CITY UNDER SIEGE:
DREAMS FOR AMERICA, HOPES FOR THE WORLD**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 08-28-25, p. C-1

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

AS WE RIGHTFULLY MARK AND COMMEMORATE one of the defining moments in the Black Freedom Struggle, the March on Washington, it is important that we remember and recommit ourselves to realize our people's dreams for a truly free and democratic America and our hopes for the well-being of the world and all in it. And for God's sake, the sake of our children, our ancestors and our own, let us, at the outset, be honest enough to concede that if we dare to dream and hope beyond the petty, perverse and oppressive, we must also dare to struggle, serve, sacrifice and even suffer to ensure that our dreams and hopes come to fruit, life-enhancing and low-hanging fruit, accessible and enjoyable for everyone everywhere.

Fifty-eight years ago, we marched on Washington, 250,000 strong and in righteous resistance to the savagery of segregation and the pathology of oppression under the banner and battle cry, "Jobs and Freedom". This overarching call to struggle contained within it several interrelated demands which included: dignity-affirming jobs and decent wages; affordable and adequate housing; quality and inclusive education; the right and protection of the vote; the end of open and covert discrimination in "federal, state and municipal governments, by employers, contractors, employment agencies and trade unions"; and legislation to achieve and sustain these gains and goods.

No one honest, aware or even half-awoke can deny that these demands, needs and issues remain today and determine the quality of our lives and the conditions of our health, well-being and capacity to live a good and meaningful life. And the critical question before us is how do we honor the March on Washington, not only in remembrance, but also in resistance? For to make it forever a

living tradition, we must choose to act, and continue the struggle to uplift the March, praise its achievements and actualize its still-to-be-achieved goals and aspirations.

To rightfully and meaningfully remember and honor this pivotal moment in Black and US history and its continuing significance for the struggle for freedom and justice in the world, then, we must constantly ask what lessons can we draw from it to achieve the good life and world we all want and deserve and leave as a worthy legacy for those who come after us. First, this means at a minimum, reflecting on and responding rightfully to the fact the Black Freedom Struggle, which the March on Washington was a signature expression of, is not finished, and there is still essential work for us to do and critical struggles for us to wage and win. Secondly, we must put and make permanent the most vulnerable at the center of our interests and efforts. For as taught in our sacred texts, we are called by history and heaven to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place especially among the voiceless and vulnerable, the downtrodden and degraded, and the fragile, unfree and oppressed.

It is important also, to note here that the March organizers intentionally chose August 28 to march on Washington, for it was the eighth anniversary of the savage lynching of Emmett Till in Mississippi. Without announcing it, they were foregrounding the continuing central issue of racism, both systemic and social, racist hatred, hostility and violence turned into public policy and socially sanctioned practice. In addition, we must practice operational unity, unity without uniformity, unity in diversity, and unity in principle, purpose and rightful practice.

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Always we think of Nana Dr. Martin Luther King and his stated uplifting dreams and hopes for our people at the March. But in drawing more lessons from the March, I want to raise the voice of the legendary labor leader Nana A. Philip Randolph who conceived the March and with his brilliant main organizer and comrade in struggle, Bayard Rustin, and others named and unnamed, brought it to fruition. He spoke to critical issues facing us, giving us added directions on the moral map of our struggle which serve as a framework for the work still to be done and the struggles still to be waged. He asked those there and us who would inherit the struggle to understand and assert ourselves as an “advanced guard of a massive, moral revolution for jobs and freedom”, which “reverberates throughout the land” and touches every place and space where there is segregation, exploitation and oppression. He reaffirms that there is a moral dimension to the struggle, for it is about freedom, justice and equality which are indispensable to any serious and substantive discourse and practice claiming the name and notion “moral”.

Again, stressing the moral character of our struggle, he states that “We want a free, democratic society dedicated to the political, economic and social advancement of man (and woman) along moral lines”. Moreover, recognizing Black people as a central moral and social vanguard, he asserts that “It falls to (Black people) to reassert this proper priority of value. . . and that we “are in the forefront of today’s movement for social and racial justice”, because of the lessons we have learned from our history and struggle. We must open new ways forward, and as Nana Dorothy Height, leader of the National Council of Negro Women and a co-planner of the March, said, we must strive and struggle ceaselessly to” “pry open wide the freedom gates”. And we must do this so that not only racial justice and social and economic justice

prevail, but also gender justice, clearly an unaddressed issue at the March and needing continuous corrective attention. And also, we must add the struggle for global justice for the world, itself, and all in it.

The March on Washington in our times, then, must not only be massive demonstrations and demands in the streets of Washinton, but also demonstrations and demands in the streets of the whole country, on campuses and in corporate spaces, at work sites and in institutions of every kind. Indeed, the March as a symbol, model and message of struggle, read rightly, must lead us to honor the moral imperative to continue the struggle, keep the faith and hold the line.

It urges us to realize and respond in righteous and relentless resistance to emerging fascism and the all-out assault on the human, cultural, political and economic rights of our people, children, women, immigrants, the elderly and ill, and others in this country and in the world. It means embracing Haji Malcolm’s teaching that regardless of wherever we are or however we are, we “are living in a country that is a battleline for all of us”, and we are living in a world where we must build solidarities to hold those lines and achieve freedom and liberation for all. Thus, we of Us say “Everywhere a battleline; every day a call to struggle”.

Likewise, in these difficult, dangerous and demanding times, we must remind ourselves and our allies and others of Nana Paul Robeson’s call to struggle during the genocidal and world-injuring rise of fascism in Italy and Germany. He tells us, but especially, the privileged people, holed up in ivory towers, corporate caves, fortified communities and countries of *imagined* isolation and *real* illusion that everyone “who loves democracy and who stand for freedom and justice” must rise up and resist. For he says and suggests, that erasure in Guernica, Spain, then, or genocide in Gaza, Palestine, now, is not a private,

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provincial or regional matter, but a highly human one. Indeed, he taught that resistance to genocide, erasure and emerging fascism and its favorite food and fuel, racism, is not the task of one group or people. For here “There is no standing above the conflict. The battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear”.

Nana A. Philip Randolph wants us to be not only planners and makers of marches, but also a vital part of “the masses in motion for freedom”. For he says, “the March on Washington is not the climax of our struggle, but a new beginning not only for (Black people) but for all Americans who thirst for freedom

and a better life”. And this means we must “return again and again to Washington in ever growing numbers until total freedom is ours. We shall settle for nothing less, and may God grant that we may have the courage, the strength, and faith in this hour of trial by fire never to falter”. And this “return to Washington” is not only to the current city under siege, but a constant return to Washington as sites, policies and practices of oppression and exploitation everywhere and on any and every level and daring to end such anti-human, life-diminishing and future deforming crimes against the targeted people, humanity and the world.▲

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