



**PRAISE SONG FOR A PEOPLE:  
PROSPECTS FOR A TRANSFORMATIVE PRESIDENCY**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

Blessed are those who work and struggle for good in the world, who rise in resistance against oppression everywhere and in all its forms. Blessed are those whose long struggle, sacrifice and suffering lead to success and joy along the way. And blessed are those who know the difference between victory in battle and winning the war and who celebrate their successes, great and small, when they come, but will not walk away from the battlefield until the larger struggle is won.

We were all in Washington in one way or another—in body, mind and/or spirit, to bear witness with the world to history and to the long-coming wonder of it; to see it, savor it and experience the multi-layered meaning of it all; to be able to say “I was there”; and to celebrate, as long as our will, eyes, ears and legs would let us, this awesome moment of a Black man, an African American, Barack Hussein Obama being inaugurated as President of the United States of America. It was another massive gathering in the capital of the country in the name and furtherance of freedom, social justice, a better future and a new course and meaning for America. And it easily called to mind the March on Washington (1963) 250,000 strong; the Million Man March/Day of Absence (1995) 2 million mighty; and even the smaller gatherings organized and defiantly present to stand up for good and right in the world.

They came rightfully feeling vindication and victory, elders and young people crying, talking of transcending injuries and insults of the past, and of happiness, promise and possibilities of the future, and of struggles waged and finally won—on several levels. And the seasoned soldiers and some who knew talked also of things to come, Dr. Martin Luther King’s unfulfilled dream, unfinished fights, and the need to turn this unbounded

and beautiful sense of solidarity, history and possibility into a movement for serious social change and a transformative presidency to aid in this. Here I take seriously Obama’s assertion that “Change doesn’t come from Washington, it comes to Washington”.

Also in our heart of hearts we know, it’s not over yet; and that this, though a grand and glorious moment, is another historical milestone and marker on the road to something greater, more essential and inclusive than one election, one man and only one way forward. In fact, Obama reminded us in his inaugural address that a difficult task and journey lies before us and to fulfill our destiny we must honor and emulate the “men and women (who) struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life”, people who were builders and doers and often obscure and anonymous, and always faithful to our highest ideals.

Said to all Americans, this message, nevertheless, had and has a special meaning for us as a people. And this is so, not only because he is Black, but also because the images, ideals and practices are rooted in our own history and lifted from the language of our lives, our work and our struggle as a people, and find common ground with others in the process. And though he is ever cautious not to make Whites uncomfortable, Obama recognizes that leaving out the fact and foundation of his Blackness, his Africanness, eliminates any claim of the uniqueness of the historical moment, deprives it of its moral meaning and reduces it to another ritual of White dominance with no hope of such worldwide involvement, such intense emotional and intellectual focus and social promise. Thus, he notes the uniqueness of the

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historical moment for him as an African American.

This is also why Elizabeth Alexander's inaugural poem, "Praise Song for the Day" was so poignant and powerful, urging us to "Say it plain, that many have died for this day. Sing the names of the dead who brought us here...Praise song for struggle; praise song for the day"—thus, praise song for a people. Likewise, Rev. Joseph Lowery, honored veteran of the Black Freedom Movement, was so central to the ceremony, beginning with a quotation from the Black National Anthem and reaffirming our social justice tradition as a people with his stress on care for the poor and vulnerable, justice for everyone, mutual respect, human solidarity, respect for creation, and peace in the world.

Obama asks us to work, serve and struggle in such a way that "it may be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end". And it is a journey toward remaking America, he says, so that it is a realization in life and practice of "the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure and happiness", a position consistently advanced by our ancestors, predecessors and us when the past rulers of this country argued and acted otherwise.

The prospects for really remaking America require in turn keeping in mind several basic things. First, we must all, Native Americans, Africans, Latinos, and Asians, as

well as in-place Whites, participate at the highest levels of decision-making and in the general process of things. Secondly, the celebration of the people must be distinguished from the self-congratulation of the established order. Otherwise, it will claim a radical change yet to be achieved and suggest the possibility of progress without sustained struggle. Thirdly, although this is an important marker in our history, it does not cancel or render irrelevant our hard-fought struggles to expand the realm of freedom and justice in this country and the world, but is an opportunity to expand them.

Moreover, we must remember, even deserved joy is no substitute for justice; elation no alternative to equality; and one person in a position, however high, is no substitute for a people's having real power over their own destiny and daily lives. Likewise, no man is a substitute for a movement and no people can or will be saved, liberated or achieve a good life except through their own self-conscious and committed efforts. Finally, until there is an equitable sharing of wealth, power and status in this country, the struggle does and must continue, not only for ourselves, but for our ancestors and the generations that come after us. For as Obama reminded us, we are indeed "the keepers of a legacy", guardians of an ancestral and enduring good, i.e., values and practices indispensable to our freedom and flourishing and the well-being of the world.

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