



**REMEMBERING THE 1992 L.A. REVOLT:
A CALCULATED CAUTIOUSNESS**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

If the possession and pursuit of money can change even the focus of faith from social justice to personal prosperity, we cannot wonder how concerns about funding and maintaining favor can contribute to redefining, not only the memories and meanings of the 1992 Los Angeles Revolt, but also those of our history and struggle, and even of our being Black. Clearly, it's not just money, but also loss of the will and courage to confront and the funded and cultivated habit of seeking safety in compromise, cautiousness and ethnic self-erasure, spitting in the wind and waiting for directions from others.

In any case, the safe-sounding comments on what the Revolt meant and means and what people experienced and their evaluation of how far we have come from that event and its aftermath, clearly demonstrate the *calculated cautiousness* that now defines the dialog. In remembering the Revolt, we were told by various leaders and spokespersons that we've come a long way and that police practices and our lives have surely improved in L.A. And this is dutifully affirmed even though the profiling or *targeting* continues; the abuse, beatings and killings persist; and the issues of increased unemployment and poverty, homelessness, lack of accessible and affordable health care, inadequate and underfunded education, and the warehousing and waste of generation after generation of young and older Black males are obvious to everyone.

There is, we must admit, also the customary concession given at the end that we still have a long way to go and much more to do. But this is given less focus and attention than the claim of progress which is part wishful and unwarranted praise of society, premature announcement of unrealized hopes and an expected "balanced" approach

necessary to be considered and called a "responsible" spokesperson or leader by the larger society. Indeed, it is as if these spokesmen and women for the community want to assure the people in power and their liberal allies who shepherd them thru the maze of constant searching for "outside" support, favor and funds, that we appreciate their meager but meaningful efforts and know how to compromise and come to terms with the political realities they've established for themselves and us.

There was a time, however, when Black leadership was seen and exercised as a self-conscious moral vocation to free the oppressed; to achieve justice for the injured, vulnerable and voiceless; to secure self-achieved power for the people over their destiny and daily lives; and to establish and maintain a just and lasting peace in the world. But there are among many, ominous signs of resignation to and even satisfaction with an unworthy dependence on the debilitating and questionable "kindness of others". Indeed, such support does not come without costs, requiring those involved to give up a vital part of themselves and of the social justice and struggle tradition of our people. And this means, in too many cases, finding or accepting new ways to operate as "unoffensively" as possible, speaking compromise to power, and caution and patience to the people, and becoming silent and less rightfully angered and active against injustice, suffering, oppression and war-making in the world.

It is a classical Kawaida contention that one of the greatest powers in the world is the capacity to define reality and make others accept it, even when it's to their disadvantage. And such is the case of calling the 1992 Los Angeles Revolt simply a riot and framing it as essentially a criminal and irrational exercise

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without dealing with the complex social conditions and the social consciousness which brought the Revolt into being and compelled even law-abiding citizens to rise up in revolt. These compelling social conditions were rooted in racism and class oppression and were palpable and persistent. And both the savage police beating of Rodney King and the unjust acquittal of the policemen who carried it out, represented for so many a system-rooted and racist disregard for Black life and rights.

These two interrelated acts of injustice reaffirmed to those who revolted, as in prior rebellions, that the system was unacceptably oppressive, and that the law, as police practice and judicial procedure, had shown itself to be little more than the will of the ruling race/class, brutally imposed and shamelessly self-justifying. Thus, there was a profound sense of outrage culminating in the conclusion that the system was illegitimate, undeserving of respect and requiring a vivid and undeniable demonstration of rejection and resistance. It is important to note also that it was a multi-cultural and multiracial revolt, even though it began among Black people in South Central Los Angeles, reaching into Pico-Union, Koreatown, Mid-City, Hollywood and downtown at police headquarters, the Civic Center and the L.A. Times.

There was an opportunity here to remember rightfully and raise relevant questions about the unfinished agenda and promises made and unkept, and to talk of where we go from here as interrelated communities and a still-to-be-built unified city. We could have asked what happened to the HUD and Rebuild

L.A. initiatives, the Community Redevelopment Agency, the promises of investment, repairing the ruins, creation of new jobs, and improving and increasing funding for schools? And we could have raised and discussed how billions went to finance gentrification of low-income communities of color, continuing police violence, and how hard we still struggle to secure equitable treatment in initiatives of transportation, housing, education, health care, and other areas of local, state, and national planning and programs.

But above all, we must, as Malcolm urged us, learn the lessons of history and act accordingly in the interest of freedom and justice. And of all the lessons we can learn, none is more important than that we have the right and responsibility to resist evil, oppression and injustice; to remember we are our own liberators, to accept our own authority to define the meaning and determine the direction of our own lives, struggle and history and to always strive and struggle to bring and sustain good in the world.

Indeed, a rightful reading of history is indispensable for moving forward toward a just and good society and world which can only be forged in long, relentless and liberating struggle. Thus, when storms of struggle rise above the horizon of history, we won't need to send for a weather woman or man to make sense of the signs we obviously see ourselves. And when the storms hit land, we will know not to accept society's self-serving and dismissive interpretation of these *tornados of discontent*, but will answer it with increased, continuous and righteous resistance.

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* and *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th Edition, www.MaulanaKarenga.org.