



**REGARDING RODNEY KING:  
REQUIEM FOR A RELUCTANT WITNESS**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

When Rodney King was snatched up into the whip and whirl of the winds of racial history in this country thru his savage beating in 1991 and the resultant revolt in 1992, it was an invitation of history he had no idea would come, no interest at first in accepting and ultimately, no way to engage it except as the man he was and tried to be. He came into our consciousness curled up on the ground, groaning and recoiling in pain from the savage beating and tazing by police, once again gone wild. He had been the focus of a rising and raging revolt, but was pushed and pulled into service to suppress the rage, counsel reconciliation, and suggest another way forward.

We had wanted him to be an active witness *in* our history not a passive one *to* it. We had wanted him to actively bear witness to the unwhitewashed truth of police brutality, expand his consciousness and commit himself to our larger struggle. And we wanted him not to be a passive witness for a peace without justice, but a bold speaker of truth about police abuse officially imposed by gun, blackjack, flashlight, fist, boot and manipulated law.

Indeed, King knew about the larger struggle against police brutality and gave evidence of his awareness of it in his statement, "I was one of the lucky ones. It was a blessing the camera was there." This signaled his experiential knowledge of the conception of the police as an occupying army in communities of color, even if he had no name for it. But he was not a social activist and thus, when asked to step up in front of the microphones and call for reconciliation rather than revolt, he put aside

the script penned for him. And in his own humble way, he spoke haltingly from the heart, saying, "People, can we all get along?", suggesting a simple solution for a complex and enduring problem. But he was in all of this, essentially an unready and reluctant witness.

Rodney King, as he easily conceded, was not the tempered and tested mold out of which heroes and heroines are made and thus, could not wear the heavy mantle of leadership many tried to put on him. He was just a simple man, caught in a web of complex problems, and yet he served as an important symbol of varied meanings. The traumatic and brutal beating by the police only added to his challenges and unresolved inner conflicts, and was part of what he meant when he said he "would always be in recovery". For it meant, he was not only in continuing recovery from the drugging, drinking and fast driving on the freeways and streets of L.A. and life, but also in recovery from the physical and psychic damage done to him as he lay helpless and was mauled without mercy or minimum consideration for his rights and life. It meant recovery from the nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety and edginess from this savage beating by the police as well as the other demons that haunted and hindered a deeply longed-for peace in his daily life.

Some editorials and columns focused on King's flaws without noting that they were a reflection, not only of his personal problems, but also the problems of society itself. Certainly, society, itself, and some of its most celebrated members, are in a constant state of self-medication also, not only on pills, liquor and other drugs of

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various designs, but also on self-deceptive illusions of being a superior and chosen race, practicing a God-preferred racialized religion, and having the undisputable right to plunder and pillage the peoples and resources of the world without question or resistance. So, King did have his demons as do other Americans, but if we've learned anything from the lessons of life, mind, heart and struggle from Frantz Fanon, it is that most of these demons are rooted in the pathology of unfreedom and oppression, fostered and sustained by society. And they can only be ultimately subdued in struggle, struggle against society and against our weaknesses and the worst of society inside of us.

In engaging narratives like this, there is often over focus on a person, discussion of an event abstracted from its history, and the exclusion of the role of the people who made it all possible. Such an approach distorts history and sets up the hero or heroine to be defined and congratulated or condemned depending upon the interests of the established order. It also denies the people their central role in their own history and hides their hard-won achievements forged in the furnace of sacrifice and struggle.

It is the people in struggle who made Rodney King a symbol, and who used the example of his barbaric beating to reaffirm the need of the people to be protected from their so-called protectors. It is the people in struggle who compelled whatever policy changes that were made or promised, and who called for a larger conversation about the brutality and corruption that pass as

police service and protection. And it is the people in struggle who gave enduring significance to King's savaging and suffering, which inspired that awesome outrage and revolt that could not be covered up, or explained away as, were and are, countless other cases of police violence and victimizing of the racially and socially vulnerable.

We live in a society too quick to congratulate and praise itself, *constantly claiming progress it has not made, a justice it does not practice and a post-racist country it has not achieved*. Indeed, it is a nation under illusion and clearly without the "liberty and justice for all" its pledge of allegiance claims. Thus, it craves and encourages repeated affirmations of forgiveness from its victims, routine calls for peace now with justice delayed, and religiously-tinged talk of healing, patience in undeserved suffering, and giving the offending agency and society time to study and correct itself.

But the killings continues, as do the brutal beatings, the racial targeting called profiling, and the stop-and-frisk policies directed against us and other communities of color. So we must put aside all illusions, fight our way thru the fog, fantasies and premature claims by society and struggle to radically change it. And in this decisive struggle, we must remember with Paul Robeson that "the battlefield is everywhere; there is no sheltered rear" and as always, keep in mind with Amilcar Cabral that we must "mask no difficulties, tell no lies and claim no easy victories."

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