Reclaiming the Second Reconstruction

Democracy, Class, and the Social Transformation of the United States

This essay was composed by Jack O'Dell for this volume. Written in September 2007, it is dedicated to the national observance of the fortieth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's Riverside Church speech, delivered April 4, 1967. ■

Forty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King publicly accepted the invitation to be co-chair of the organization Clergy and Laity Concerned at a meeting sponsored by the organization at the Riverside Church in New York. He opened his remarks by saying that he was using the occasion to break silence concerning the Vietnam War and to point to some objective challenges beyond Vietnam. The four decades since Dr. King delivered that speech have been rich in experience drawn from the struggle of movements in many areas of our national life. Tens of thousands of people have been directly involved in social change activities of great variety and intensity.

Indeed, the silence is broken. The silence that surrounded the acceptance of the racist institution of segregation was broken by a mass movement led by the African American community, and that movement served as a catalyst for "speaking truth to power" by the feminist movement, by Latinos and Asians, Native Americans, gays and lesbians. These movements brought into the open many of the truths concerning how we felt about things that had been covered over by the silence of conformity.

Breaking the silence has led to significant advances in putting into place institutions for sustaining much-needed truth on many levels. Through biographies, oral histories, documentary films, Internet systems, "street newspapers," the development of specialized studies in academia, and movements that educated people in the morality of opposing war—the silence is still being broken and old stereotypes discarded, and the struggle continues. Nothing is more central to understanding the American experience than recognizing that to break silence

and to create the conditions for thoughtful, respectful public discussion are the first steps in the social change process. When this recognition is followed with sustained constructive action, the social change process can be carried to its completion.

And so, in the long tradition of appreciation and measured satisfaction, we choose to "rejoice, rejoice, and be exceedingly glad." This sense of gratitude is necessarily informed and instructed by the recognition that this is a deeply troubling period in the nation's history. The deepening poverty of everyday life, both materially and spiritually, the continued expansion of rampant militarism, and the callous neglect of other urgent priorities that this set of circumstances inevitably creates—including random episodes of police brutality in our neighborhoods, a grim reminder of some unfinished business of our human rights struggle—these are all predictably taking a heavy toll on the quality of life in America. High levels of uncertainty and low levels of hope, often leading to despair, are feelings shared by millions. That evening in 1967, Dr. King mentioned in particular the triple scourges of militarism, racism, and poverty. Those scourges continue to be very much alive in our land, and the challenges they present to us are of a transformational magnitude. Nevertheless, the experience we have gained informs us that these challenges are not insurmountable. Transformation is as natural as life itself, if we have the courage and the vision to embrace it.

Consistent with the internationalism of the day, Dr. King spoke of the "World House" we all live in and our shared responsibility for making life better for all. It is indeed an inconvenient truth that the world house we live in *now* is poorer than it was then, often wracked by civil wars, the AIDS pandemic, inequitable formulas imposed by the World Bank, and famine. All contribute to the desire to just survive among so many millions, as we try to sustain life under conditions of economic, social, and environmental impoverishment. Breaking silence on these matters today is, as it has been in the past, an indispensable prerequisite for allowing truths to be articulated and acted upon. And one such truth of considerable weight and merit is that the foreign policy pursued by the United States over these last forty years has been a major factor in the creation of these tragic conditions in our world.

In his farewell address as he left office in 1961, President Eisenhower warned us of the "grave implications" of the growing military-industrial complex and urged that it not be allowed to "endanger our liberties or democratic processes." Over the past four decades, that complex has grown exponentially, nurtured by corporate greed, national arrogance,

and, too often, by a grievous lack of attention from the general public. Operating under the cover of "defense," what has been created is a malignancy that is out of control. This has given rise to an oligarchy of wealth whose power is used to distort and manipulate the political culture. Public deception is routine and endemic: the missiles of war are named "peacemakers"; a sadistic prison run by the U.S. military in Iraq is called "Camp Redemption"; and white supremacy is reincarnated in the designation of the United States as the "lone superpower." And the malady is being spread through "globalization."

Small wonder that voter alienation at home is rampant. It is a rare election season in our country when as many as 60 percent of us go to the polls to cast our vote.

The privatization mania is being promoted as the new state religion in the shaping of public policy, replacing the anti-communism of the Cold War years as a compulsory belief. A corporate greed team headed by the U.S. multinational corporations is rewriting the rules by which civil society is expected to live and function. The mysticism of "the market" has been introduced into the national belief system in order to create a new attachment for citizens to hold on to, as we are all redefined by corporate America as "consumers."

Over these forty years, a pernicious militarism has locked itself into the institutional framework of American society like an intestinal parasite in the body politic of the nation. War is a commodity sold to the American public as "defense." It is institutionalized in the domestic life of our country by the spread of military bases, which the public often views as a source of much-needed local employment. Weapons sales abroad are a major component of our international market and a major factor in counting the GNP (Gross National Product). The weapons industry is partly sustained by a foreign policy that aggressively produces wars in which weapons are destroyed; then, of course, the stockpiles need to be replenished and new weapons proposed to Congress for financing in preparation for the next cycle.

Over these four decades, both Democratic and Republican administrations have cut resources for programs designed to reduce or eliminate poverty in order to provide money for various military expenditures, complete with the predictable noncompetitive bidding and cost overruns by the largest military contractors such as General Dynamics, Lockheed Martin, Enron, Chevron-Texaco, and Halliburton. Military recruitment, as is well known, is made easier by the poverty that has been created. Thousands of our young people join up, inspired by the

promise that they will have money for college after their tour of duty. The admonition to "be all that you can be" in the military, the popular TV ad many of us have no doubt seen, is a promise extended to the youth of America free of the hidden reality of one condition: " . . . if you return safely to civilian life and your health has not been seriously impaired by the experience."

We are all in a position to be witnesses to the growth of poverty across this country in urban, suburban, exurban, and traditionally rural areas. Perhaps the most dramatic recent revelation of this condition was what the world saw in New Orleans when the long-neglected levees broke under the impact of Hurricane Katrina. Thirty percent of the city's population lived in poverty before this catastrophe, and that reality is mirrored in cities all across the country. From Oakland and Los Angeles on the West Coast to Gary, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Benton Harbor (Michigan) in the Midwest; from the cities and towns of upstate New York, Newark and Camden in New Jersey, and North Philadelphia to the former textile towns of North Carolina, the nation has been in the grip of a "Stealth Depression" since the mid-1970s.

The process of general impoverishment among large sections of the working class and lower-income strata of the middle class of the U.S. population involves, by some estimates, as many as forty million people. There are the poor who have experienced this condition for some time, as many as two or more generations. Then there are the recent poor, whose economic situation has been affected by such experiences as a catastrophic illness in the family, for which they had inadequate health insurance. Half of all the persons filing bankruptcy in 2006, under the new, punitive federal bankruptcy law, cited family illness as the reason. The already poor include the millions who have for years paid as much as half their income every month to avoid living in substandard housing, families who have lost the battle against rising rents stemming from the gentrification of their community, and those taken advantage of by the loan sharks in the "subprime mortgage" market. Yet another sector is on the way to becoming poor as a result of mounting personal credit card debt.

There is sound evidence that the fabled middle class in the United States is shrinking. In reality, the pattern just described of the descending road into poverty has more momentum than the traditional upward mobility pattern into the middle class. As for the African American population, the fact that we are 13 percent of the U.S. population but 30 to 35 percent of the poor has much to do with the legacy of nearly a

century of apartheid/segregation in which the ability of our families to acquire decent-paying jobs or wealth was far more restricted than was generally true for the white immigrant population.

It is evident that the problem of poverty is a systemic one that does not yield easily to band-aid solutions. It is one of the expressions of the anemic character of American democracy that we have not addressed the issue of distribution of wealth as a democratic objective. At the working-class level, since the Great Depression our society has assumed that "jobs equal opportunity, and opportunity equals democracy." Taken in this context, the "American Dream" as a cultural expression is a historically vacant abstraction that sustains itself in the culture by pretending to allow whatever an individual achieves to be regarded as the fulfillment of the American Dream, regardless of the relatively impoverished condition of the community. The American Dream has now become an excuse for leaving us as individuals to save ourselves, if we can. This design, intended or not, has the effect of creating "a universal selfishness," which Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois described in American life a century ago.

The Great Depression of the 1930s lasted ten years, until the massive military expenditures and the draft during World War II revived the economy. The current Stealth (slow-motion) Depression we're in today has been a growing blight and pain in the lives of tens of millions of people for the past three decades and is not yet over. Given its longevity, its impact on our society is already having serious consequences in the dislocation of people's lives. The massive loss of livable-wage jobs, exorbitant interest rates charged in the credit card addiction, and the tax write-offs by the wealthiest sections of the population are a triple trap operating against the public interest. Add to this the burden of an ever-escalating military budget that a majority of working-class taxpayers carry, and the picture of growing poverty across the nation appears as no surprise. This represents a profound injustice in our nation's economic disorder. Much-needed assistance to low-income families with dependent children is reduced in the name of "welfare reform." Public school budgets for the arts and health education are considered expendable. These "structural adjustments" are imposed in order to support a foreign policy of endless military aggression, along with the preparation this requires.

Poverty is not a spectator sport, and building more casinos, sports stadiums, and theme parks has little chance of providing a long-term remedy. Its relation to our national obsession with militarism is graphically illustrated in the following: A few years ago, the Defense Department

gave a contract for a new aircraft carrier to be built in the shipyards at Pascagoula, Mississippi, home to U.S. Senator Trent Lott. The children of Mississippi live in one of the poorest states in the union and have one of the poorest school systems. Had the hundreds of millions of dollars invested in a new aircraft carrier instead been invested in a quality early childhood education program like Head Start, it would have been a better investment for the whole country—an investment in our future, the children. Predictably, once again the military mania called "defense" invariably trumps investment in community, reflected in the choices made by the influence peddlers and their connection to government decision-making.

It is everyday experience that across the nation we, the working people of the nation, are losing our jobs, losing our homes, often losing income (if we happen to find a new job), and losing our pensions to corporate corruption or downsizing. Yet we hear from political leadership that the goal of public policy today is "an ownership society." What is policy, in fact, is this cynically crafted propaganda. All the while, the corporate media pundits, who are the designated "experts" of our experience, continue to publicly wrestle with the question of what is bothering people the most, the economy or the war. They present these as separate issues; supposedly, we are bothered by either one or the other. In reality, these issues are related, and the deeper truth of this period, if we connect the dots, is the war economy. It is this reality that is a profound challenge to our national morality as well as to our economic health.

> Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey
> Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.

This cogent observation was made by the Irish playwright and essayist Oliver Goldsmith in his work "The Deserted Village," upon witnessing brutal evictions of the poor in Ireland a few years before the American Revolution. *Ill Fares the Land* is also the title of a book by Carey McWilliams, one of the outstanding intellectual activists of the Depression era. McWilliams's social commentary found its analogue in the photographs of famed photojournalist Dorothea Lange. Together they captured the despair and displacement of thousands of farm families whose hopes were blown away in those years, whether by the dust storms that swept the prairie states in the 1930s or the expansion of agribusiness in California, which decimated small farm communities and impoverished thousands of migrant farm workers. These works summon our attention to a possible message for our own times. The

deserted villages that dot the national landscape today can be viewed in just about every state in the union. Family farms have fallen victim to the growth of monopoly in agriculture. Cities that were once centers of steady industrial employment and the vitality of small businesses now face urban blight and crushing poverty. Wealth accumulates in the hands of a small percentage of the population, while many in the working class are working more hours than ever before in order to simply maintain their standard of living, not improve it.

This Stealth Depression is in some respects more ominous than the collapse that occurred in what we call the Great Depression of the 1930s. At that time, we had an industrial infrastructure that was in place but had simply stopped running. Working-class communities that had grown up in the post–World War I period still maintained a vitality that kept people hopeful in spite of the economic trauma. Early on, in 1932, the voting population elected a government that was part of the solution, not part of the aggravation of the problem. The new administration, led by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, told us, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." The people of the United States expected the government to be part of the solution, and the federal administration shared that expectation. The New Deal was the promise, and the radio was the line of communication between the American people and the government they had elected. It was a decade-long depression, but hope was sustained as steady improvements were visible in daily life.

One of the most important features of that depression was that the revenues received by the government as taxes were invested in the nation's revival and development through projects like the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which brought rural electrification to small farmers. The Civilian Conservation Corps recruited unemployed youth to do important work in revitalizing communities and the environment through such means as reforestation. The youth of the Great Depression did not join the military as a way to have regular employment. President Roosevelt said, "We are building the future," and that meant giving youth and others opportunities to work on projects that would enrich the lives of future generations. Federal regulatory agencies were established whose function it was to assert federal authority in protecting the public from the effects of mismanagement and corruption in the corporate sector and to secure certain rights. Such agencies as the Securities and Exchange Commission, the National Labor Relations Board, the Federal Communications Commission, and others had a mandate to guard the public trust. In the last three decades, however, with the rise of

the conservative movement, such agencies have invariably come under attack and had their authority restricted.

Following World War II, which challenged the rise of fascism, the passage of the G.I. Bill of Rights, with its opportunities for education and affordable housing, extended the pattern that the New Deal had set into motion. It fueled and sustained the optimism that was very much a part of the spirit of the early postwar years. However, the death of President Roosevelt in April 1945, the ascendancy of a neo-Confederate administration led by Harry Truman, and a Republican majority elected to the House of Representatives in the off-year election of 1946 laid the groundwork for the chilling of these hopes and the termination of the New Deal. This carefully orchestrated chill was called the Cold War, and it was the antecedent to the large-scale crisis we are witnessing today. The rise of the military-industrial complex had its beginnings in this political environment.

The postwar period of relative economic prosperity within the United States ended in the early 1970s. We are now witnessing the result of a parallel development in international relations. The moral authority of the United States, inherited from our contribution to the struggle against fascism during World War II, has been seriously depleted by a foreign policy of brutal national arrogance and no longer enjoys the same degree of respect on the world scene. As a result of these altered conditions, national and international, we are now pursuing the "American Dream" under an entirely new set of circumstances, none of which is favorable to its achievement.

Pursuing the American Dream is not a universal value. Obviously, many people around the world immigrate to the United States in search of better opportunities for living. However, much of the motivation for that journey comes from efforts to escape the ruin and corruption that are the impact of U.S. foreign policy on their country, as represented by civil wars, hunger, the demands of the International Monetary Fund, and the like. The U.S.A. has been sold, and sometimes oversold, as an escape from these conditions. Most people in the world have a strong attachment to their own country, with its culture and historical traditions. Given the opportunity, they would prefer to work out their aspirations for improvement in life right at home.

We take justifiable pride in the human rights achievements of our country, as represented by the constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of political association set forth in our Bill of Rights. It is worth noting, however, that our constitution has no guarantees with regard to hunger and want.

In one of his regular "fireside chats" with the nation in 1941 (months before Pearl Harbor), President Roosevelt spoke of the postwar world ahead after victory. In his vision, "freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech and expression" were among the guarantees that would make the world a better place. These became popularly known as "the Four Freedoms," and it was always the president's view that we in the United States should lead by example.

In the last sixty years, many wealthy industrialized countries have adopted not only social security for the elderly but also social legislation encompassing the right to universal health care, paid family leave, a quality public school education through the university level, paid vacations of a month or more for all workers, unemployment insurance that covers up to two-thirds of normal income, and a guaranteed annual income as a safety net of support for families with children. After two generations, many workers in the European states have become accustomed to these benefits; now their movements are struggling to incorporate these gains into the new European Union constitution as fundamental rights.

This type of social legislation is the means by which modern industrial societies spread the wealth created. Underlying this legislation is the understanding that the working class, not just the entrepreneurial establishment, creates wealth and the services that enhance the quality of life. How does it happen that we, the wealthiest industrialized country in the world, have stopped short of this kind of legislation and confined the definition of our democracy to the "freedom of speech" category? By the above-cited standards, we in the United States are lagging behind other countries that also subscribe, as we do, to freedom of speech and freedom of the press. A recent study revealed that among the twenty wealthiest countries in the world, the United States and Britain had the highest rates of child poverty. That is a mirror of our history of limiting our view of economic justice to wages and pensions or ignoring it altogether. A recent study by academics at the University of California at Berkeley had the following comment concerning the condition of children in our country: "A child born into a wealthy family in the United States today can experience a life of comfort and opportunities unimaginable for most children in the world, while a child born into poverty in the United States today will face severe problems of many kinds not experienced by children born in France, Japan, or Canada."

In the two decades following World War II and the military defeat of fascism, a major shift took place in the world, toward public ownership

of vital assets in each country. Not only in Europe, an estimated one-third of whose wealth had been destroyed in the war, was this the trend; it also appeared among newly emerging countries that were successfully throwing off the chains of colonialism. They, too, were seeking out the possibilities of a "noncapitalist road of development." These countries of the Third World had years of experience with the capitalist plunder that the European colonial system imposed.

To facilitate rapid reconstruction of the economy as well as national economic planning, state public ownership of railroads, mines, utility companies, transportation, banks, insurance companies, and shipyards, in varying degrees, became the new model. Needless to say, working-class organizations and a variety of political parties were active supporters.

Corporate America would have none of this. The men whom President Roosevelt had, in the fight for the reforms of the New Deal, called "economic royalists" had actually gained wealth during the war. Fortunately none of our cities were bombed, or factories destroyed. To the contrary, expansion of facilities in many areas had been financed by the U.S. government to meet the demands of the war effort. These were a corporate prize that this public ownership idea threatened. The example of TVA was more than enough to put the economic royalists on the alert. The Cold War atmosphere launched by the Truman administration provided the cover for a campaign to have the big corporations get hold of these expanded production facilities at fire-sale prices. One of the biggest transfers of public assets to private corporations in the nation's history took place. Public ownership of this wealth that public taxes had originally created was overturned, in a political atmosphere of "stopping creeping socialism."

There is an industrial area outside New Orleans that stretches ninety miles up to Baton Rouge. I lived in the area during the 1950s. During the war, the federal government had invested in expanding the capacity of the Firestone Corporation to make synthetic rubber to replace losses of rubber supply from Malaysia after the Japanese armies captured Singapore. Firestone, together with an Esso refinery and Alcoa, developed a petrochemical industrial complex there.

By the 1980s, the entire area was known as "cancer alley" because of the high rate of cancer—one of the highest in the nation—among the local population, a result of industrial pollution. A major environmental justice movement of local activists has been mobilized there. This is also one of the grim realities that should be understood in reviewing the Katrina tragedy and the neglected levees in New Orleans.

In the forty years since Dr. King's Riverside Church speech, addressed to the government and people of the United States, we are witnesses to the fact that the number of families in poverty has grown, personal debt has grown, long-term unemployment and low-wage employment have grown, the number of our children dropping out of school before high school graduation has grown, the number of families who have lost their defined-benefit pension has grown, the number without health insurance has grown. The value of the U.S. dollar has declined in relation to the other major currencies of the world.

Familiar landmarks in our daily economic and community lives have begun to vanish. Steel from Pittsburgh and Gary has all but disappeared. The docks of New York, Oakland, and San Francisco have been automated. The garment industry has left New York City. Ohio and North Carolina have lost hundreds of thousands of industrial jobs to outsourcing and so-called "free trade." Auto production in Detroit is almost a thing of the past, as is shipyard work in Philadelphia. Hundreds of American-built cargo ships have been transferred to foreign-flag registry, a practice that gives them what are ironically called "flags of convenience," as the owners search for greater profits from cheaper labor. The San Francisco general strike of 1934 gave birth to progressive trade unionism in the maritime industry, and the United States at the end of World War II had the largest merchant marine fleet in the world. This has now been reduced to a small fraction of its former size—it is, indeed, almost nonexistent. Giving the excuse that investors demand ballooning year-after-year profits, corporations have steadily drained away decent-paying jobs in manufacturing to countries where workplace safety is absent and poverty wages are the norm.

Forty years ago, my hometown, Detroit, had a population of two million. It was the recognized world capital of automobile production. In the United States, it had the reputation of being the city with the greatest proportion of family home ownership in the country, as a result of good-paying jobs and union benefits. A decade earlier, its public schools ranked among the best in the country. Detroit was a city with a great tradition in jazz even before the advent of the popular Motown sound. In 1963, two months before the March on Washington, Detroit had the largest civil rights march in the country, with 125,000 people marching down Woodward Avenue behind Dr. King, UAW president Walter Reuther, and community leaders. Each year, Detroit put on the biggest NAACP Freedom Fund dinner in the country.

On the other hand, by the mid-1960s, deterioration had already begun to set in; Detroit would be among the more than two dozen cities whose rebellious protests in the summer of 1967 marked that season as the summer of discontent. Police brutality, the Vietnam War draft, speed-up on the assembly lines in the auto plants, and the breaking up of long-established neighborhoods, which was called "urban renewal," all had become issues of importance that stirred people to protest.

Nothing of substance is replacing that which has been lost. This suggests a society in a condition of advanced deterioration. The wealthiest 1 percent of the population now owns more of the nation's wealth-producing assets than at any time since the dominance of the robber barons at the end of the nineteenth century. Democracy unattended by public awareness will ultimately cease to exist. A morally bankrupt foreign policy will contribute to this end just as surely as corporate theft or any other kind of corruption.

The existence of widespread poverty and economic insecurity affecting the lives of millions of people in our country is a democracy issue. Like the racist segregation system and the second-class status of women (both of which have historically been considered part of the American tradition), poverty in America is institutionalized and structured; that's what sustains it over generations. An economy that creates wealth while public policy spreads economic deprivation is a challenge to democracy. That challenge doesn't yield to nickel-and-dime "remedies" like the long-overdue increases in the minimum wage. The 2007 increase in the minimum wage was the first in ten years. Such concessions, reluctantly granted, are designed to placate the poor, not to fundamentally correct the problem. Meanwhile, in this current decade, the richest 5 percent of the population has had a 45 percent increase in average income.

The reality of the general impoverishment of the working-class poor and the spread of economic insecurity into the once-thought-to-be-secure "middle class" is an indictment that ought to be recognized as morally unacceptable in a healthy democracy. But it is not in the nature of this capitalist republic in which we live to address the problem of poverty as a systemic problem. That would require an interconnected discussion of health care; good public transportation systems in our cities and rural areas; job training; a quality public school system that encourages learning as a social value, not a commodity; reasonably easy access to college and university education; and grassroots organizing to secure the involvement of those most affected in this discussion. We

have not had this kind of discussion at the national and local community level since the late 1940s, when Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party were still viable. That's not an accident; it's the result of sixty years of the Cold War and its impact on our political culture.

Instead we have been given as a substitute the "American Dream" as an object of individual pursuit, which holds that all things are possible if we just play by the rules and that the system is designed to reward us. As mature, thinking adults of all ages, we would be wise to avoid becoming prisoners of that chase. The countries that have lower rates of poverty (including child poverty) and longer life expectancy than the United States follow a different model.

A substantive democracy does not neglect its children, allowing millions of them to go hungry and uneducated, while it dissipates its national resources on military adventures. Repeated military invasions of small countries, often located thousands of miles from the nation's shores, who have never committed any act of hostility to justify such an action, is not the behavior of a substantive democracy.

Dr. King opened up a critique of this behavior when he said that as an advocate of nonviolence as a way of living, he recognized and regretted that America was "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." One year to the day later, Martin was taken from us. He didn't live to see the United States spread the war in Vietnam into the small neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia with both air strikes and troop landings; or launch the military invasions of Grenada, Haiti, and Panama; or conduct the now seventeen-year pillage of the sovereign nation of Iraq, which began with the first Gulf War and a campaign of brutal sanctions and escalated to a full-scale invasion and occupation; or enlarge the U.S. arsenal of weapons of mass destruction to include depleted uranium missiles.

This record adds up to one of the most perfidious and shameful examples of a foreign policy carried out by any democratic country on the planet today. It is the very embodiment of white American nationalism, designed and made functional by those interests represented by the military-industrial-media complex, whose stranglehold on American society has not diminished but rather has grown considerably over the last four decades. Needless to say, some representatives of the "political class" in both major parties have been indispensable in helping this antidemocratic process consolidate.

The world has witnessed this behavior before. It is not new. It is the classic behavior of an empire.

The African American Presence

America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—America will be!
LANGSTON HUGHES

The worlds of empire and slavery are inextricably linked in our history, and in the African American consciousness forged out of that painful experience. This community has a longstanding tradition of outspoken, public opposition to empire and its racist ethos.

Some of us will recall when, in the early stages of the Cold War, many politicians in both parties and the corporate media were regularly proclaiming American "leadership of the Free World" while in practice U.S. foreign policy was supporting countries in Western Europe in their attempt to hold on to their respective empires. In everyday conversations in our movement at the time, it was common to hear the interpretation "America is trying to Mississippi-ize the world!"

Like everybody else, blacks read the *New York Times* and the local newspapers of record in the urban communities where we lived. However, we also had the *Pittsburgh Courier,* the *Baltimore Afro-American,* the *Amsterdam News* in New York, the *California Eagle* in Los Angeles, and the *Oklahoma Black Dispatch*. Newspapers of this quality brought us news of the world beyond America—the world of the colonized and the dispossessed and their aspirations for freedom, peace, and independence. The National Negro Publishers Association had attorney Charles Howard stationed at the United Nations, regularly reporting on the work of the U.N. Decolonization Committee through a network of such news channels. Further, these media institutions serving the black community were the originators and promoters of the "Double-V" campaign during the war: victory over fascism abroad and victory over white supremacist practices at home.

Many veterans returning from World War II, having served the nation while being subjected to the insulting Jim Crow practices of the armed forces, came home with an attitude of both anticipation and determination that a change was in the making. Their awareness of internationalism had been nurtured and enriched by their experience abroad.

Especially in the urban industrial cities of the North and West, an upbeat sense of a better time was reinforced and reflected in the postwar culture of creative artists in jazz, which extended over the next two decades. As examples, Duke Ellington's "New World A-Comin'," a tone poem introduced at a concert in Indianapolis in the summer of

1945; the architects of the bebop contribution to jazz; Dizzy Gillespie's recording of "Night in Tunisia"; and Miles Davis's "Sketches of Spain" crystalized the musical expression of a postwar sophistication as the temper of the times, along with Aretha Franklin's "Respect" and Max Roach's "Freedom Now Suite."

Another important development in this period was the emergence of a distinct West Coast community of struggle, which had been enlarged by recent arrivals from the segregated South. This community focused on dealing with all the (sometimes more subtle) racist practices found in the West as well as embracing new opportunities encountered in the West Coast milieu. This migration rounded out the national picture of the black community in the modern era as a predominantly urban working-class community, one very supportive of anti-racist, progressive trade unions, as represented by the CIO at the time. It also set the geopolitical framework for supporting the rising tide of resistance to every facet of the segregation system that would burst forth from the South a decade later.

The half-century beginning in the mid-1930s Depression era and extending through the decade of the 1980s represents our finest hour since the Reconstruction period immediately following the Civil War. Sometimes referred to by historians as "the Long Civil Rights Movement," it had as its motivating ethos completing the agenda of the earlier attempt at reconstruction, which had been brutally terminated by a regime of terror and institutionalized racism.

This era in the twentieth century is further confirmation of the consistent role of the African American community as a cutting-edge political force for progressive change in the United States. As such, it does not follow mainstream public political behavior when that behavior is retrogressive.

Black Americans abandoned the "party of Lincoln" in the early 1930s to embrace the New Deal of President Roosevelt and to become an active ally of organized labor in building the new, progressive unions of the working class through the CIO. They continued this relation to the Democratic Party through the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, as much of the progressive Great Society legislation (Medicare for the elderly, Head Start for the children, and so on) was shepherded through Congress by Representative Adam Clayton Powell from Harlem, chair of the House Labor and Education Committee. During the Nixon years in the White House, Nixon proposed that the Republican Party focus on winning the Latino vote as a counterbalance to the black vote in the Democratic Party.

African Americans in the 1980s did not join the stampede to the right for Ronald Reagan because their instincts and experience convinced them that this was not for the public good. Instead, African Americans provided the grassroots catalyst for launching the Rainbow Coalition and the two "Jesse Jackson for President" campaigns of that decade, as Jackson sought the Democratic Party nomination. The Rainbow Coalition, it will be recalled, represented the participation of a wide range of voters, and its agenda served as a vehicle for clarifying what a progressive public policy agenda should include, in both domestic and foreign affairs.

The great tragedy of the twentieth-century phase of the American experience after the Second World War was that the American people never made the transition from war to peace. Instead, our nation went from war to "Cold War," a dark design, the handiwork of American political leadership.

The Age of Empire is over, terminated by the sacrifices of tens of millions of people across the world, in the struggle to defeat fascism in World War II and in the victories scored by the anti-colonial independence movements in the postwar period. The calculated effort to give new life to this discredited system of exploitation through a made-in-America model is the blind ambition of those who have contempt for these achievements of humanity and do not accept the judgment of history. They believe that assuming the status of "lone superpower" invests them with the ability (that is, the moral authority) to reverse history. This is the agenda of the most racist, most militarist sections of finance capital in our country today.

They are the soul of the Republican Party, which today serves as the primary vehicle for the reversal, in substance, of all the progressive democratic reforms achieved by various people's movements in our country during the twentieth century. Their junior partners in this effort are the "centrist" Democrats, whose role is a strategic one of institutionalizing the abandonment of the progressive New Deal traditions of their party and substituting centrism as the new point of reference. This posture allows them to appear different from the Republicans in the public political arena, while steadily following them to the right.

Viewed in the larger framework of the American experience, much of this effort embodies the spirit of the old Confederacy trying to make a comeback. Enriched by decades of Cold War "defense" contracts from the federal treasury, the Sun Belt capitalists of our time are riding the contemporary tide with great expectations that they will run the world.

The ideology of the slaveholders always favored empire, from the beginning of the British colonies here in North America. The deal they were able to manage, which allowed them to increase their representation in Congress by claiming extra votes equivalent to three-fifths of their slave property (an arrangement enshrined in the Constitution of this new capitalist republic), kept them on board with the new state. As is well known, this was one of a series of "compromises," including passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, that held the American Union together for more than seventy years.

Witnessing the rising tide of abolitionism, the slaveowners rebelled against the Union and formed the Confederate States of America (1861). That action envisioned the possibility of acquiring empire through the restoration of slavery in those countries of Central America where slavery had been abolished by the Bolivarian independence revolutions in Latin America, in addition to possible alliances with Cuba and Brazil, where slavery had not yet been abolished. The military component the Confederacy lacked was a navy. To fill this gap, they attempted to negotiate naval support with Britain, whose textile mills in Manchester and Liverpool were dependent on regular supplies of southern cotton. Southern cotton was produced for a world capitalist market, of which British industrial development was the apex at the time. However, the workers in those "dark satanic mills" were being organized to change their own working conditions, and they followed the class position of the Working Men's Party put forward by Karl Marx at the time: "Labor in white skin will never be free as long as labor in black skin is enslaved." Their resistance was a factor in Britain's decision not to enter the Civil War on the Confederate side.

The people of the United States can take justifiable pride in being the first to break out of the British empire and, through the American Revolution, establish a new republic in the eighteenth century. In this revolution, the monarchy and nobility as institutions of the old regime were abolished, and the people ("Third Estate") are sovereign. Notwithstanding this *history-making achievement,* the thread of empire runs through the entire fabric of territorial expansion and development of the new American nation.

Through the annexation of the sovereign territories of Native American nations, achieved through forced removal and dispossession, and the annexation of one-third of the territory of the Mexican Republic in the war of 1846–48, the United States expanded its regime into an overland

empire. From this continental base, a classical overseas empire component was added. This began with the U.S. military invasion of the Philippines, with the objective of overthrowing the new Filipino republic, which had recently won its independence from Spain. The Filipino people were the first in Asia to have a liberation movement. This military aggression by the United States lasted four years and led to the Spanish-American War and the further annexation of Spanish overseas territories as colonies.

In this empire expansion, it will be noted, war is the instrument of coercion and conquest. There is a line from a Broadway musical that makes the cogent observation:

> In America, the kings are the employers
> And the princes their lawyers.

In the new political atmosphere created by the military defeat of fascism and the rise of successful independence movements throughout the colonial world, the Philippines won independence from the U.S. empire, Puerto Rico accepted "commonwealth status" as a compromise of its goal of independence, and Hawaii was granted statehood. With these adjustments, the United States proceeded to design a new model of empire. This involved establishing a worldwide network of American military bases. These are the sinews of the new empire. Democracy asks the questions: In how many of these countries was a national referendum held on the proposal for bases, allowing the people to know and make an informed decision about the American bases? How many of these countries have military bases in the United States?

The American people do not agree with empire, and consequently this network of some seven hundred military bases in thirty-two countries is not run by some bureaucratic office identified with colonialism. These bases are supervised by the U.S. Defense Department, along with several national security agencies that were established as federal government institutions in the late 1940s and are essential components of the military-industrial complex.

I was a member of a U.S. peace delegation to the NATO countries of Western Europe organized by the *Nation* magazine in 1981. At the time there were huge demonstrations all over Europe in opposition to the Reagan administration's plans to deploy cruise missiles on European soil. Among the meetings we had in the Netherlands was one with a group of peace leaders from the Catholic University of Neijmegen. One of the women in that group told us, "We have a saying here: 'The

Germans came in 1940 and left in 1945. The Americans came in 1945; when are they leaving?'"

We are in a qualitatively new situation in the United States today. Wise judgment would be served through the study of the collective experience gained by the great variety of movements in our country for democratic rights over the past half-century. This would enlarge the body of wisdom, enabling us to transform the present situation into one of achieving substantive democracy, however long it takes.

The abolition of law-enforced segregation and culturally promoted institutional racism in the United States arguably stands as the preeminent achievement of American democracy in the twentieth century. Most of the strategies, inspirational vision, energy, and sacrifice came from the Freedom Movement of the black community. This rightly earned them the moral authority to attract thousands of every nationality, creed, and color across the spectrum to take up the banner of struggle necessary to achieve this significant change in the way we live as human beings.

It is a confirmation that the nearly four hundred years embodied in the African American experience are of profoundly significant value in illuminating the road to the transformation of the United States into a society of substantive democracy and peace. In the real life of society, democracy and peace are dialectically inseparable. The African American experience is the quintessential component of and point of reference for any comprehensive understanding of the American experience. It is not a footnote to America's history, not a mere shortcoming. Rather, the African American experience provides the greatest insight into how the antagonistic contradiction between capitalist hegemony as an institutional reality and the consistent struggle for human rights plays out in this North American context called the United States of America.

During the 2004 presidential election campaign, a prominent conservative Republican magazine decided to endorse the candidacy of Senator John Kerry. The magazine's editors gave a part of the rationale for recommending this choice to their readers in this way: "This is not your grandfather's Republican Party." It can be said today with equal validity that this is not your grandfather's two-party system, nor is it your grandfather's "free enterprise" capitalism of pre–World War II days operating in our country. The present version of that capitalism is a parasitic variety that lacks social substance, operationally thrives on satisfying short-term greed, and has no public conscience. The materialism, racism, and militarism that Dr. King spoke of are its most favorable habitat, and public deception its trademark.

At the time of the Civil War, the great abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass said, "We must rise to the challenge with which history confronts us." The challenges we confront today are not the same—but in some respects they aren't that different, either. Let us take up the challenge with determination, revolutionary patience, and a strong and active faith. Venceremos!