

It Is Time to Break the Silence



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Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world. Moreover, when the issues at hand seem as perplexed as they often do in the case of this dreadful conflict, we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty.

But we must move on. Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.

Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movement well and pray that our own inner being may be sensitive to its guidance, for we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems to close around us.

—The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

*I*n this critical period in our nation's history, those of us who search for alternative national policy would do well to remember Dr. King's words. These words suggest ways of framing more productive post-September 11 alternatives as new ways beyond the darkness that seems to close around us—ways that reflect the emerging opinion among African-American leaders.

DO NOT SEND SMART BOMBS ON DUMB MISSIONS

Dr. Joseph E. Lowery, president of the Georgia Coalition for a People's Agenda and chairman of the Black Leadership Forum, has asked the federal government not to continue sending "smart bombs on dumb missions," referring to trigger-happy posturing

toward new, yet-unknown, and illusive locations. He cautioned that, “We have affirmed violence as an acceptable means of solving problems. We have led the way in the United States and, like Libya and China, we still use the death penalty. We fill up our prisons (with people of color) and we don’t seem to learn that violence begets violence. . . . We have sown the wind and now we are reaping the whirlwind.”

Eddie N. Williams, president of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, also has expressed concerns about priorities and balance in America’s security responses. In the Joint Center’s *FOCUS* magazine, Williams wrote that the federal government urged us to return to business as usual: “Believing this to be our patriotic duty, we heed [the] call. And while we must accept that life will never return to ‘normal’ as we knew it prior to September 11, we still must commit as a nation to rebuilding businesses, the financial markets, consumer confidence, and *building new coalitions*” (italics mine).

Also writing in *FOCUS*, Eisenhower Foundation board member Roger W. Wilkins, professor of American Studies at George Mason University, has addressed patriotism and the need to defend the nation against terrorism, but has pointedly questioned the impact of policies which have been implemented or considered since September 11: “I’m much more patriotic than I thought I was. My patriotism has a lot of dissent in it, but it’s patriotic nonetheless.”

REVERSE THE ASSAULT ON CIVIL LIBERTIES

Some of the federal government’s recent policies are eroding our constitutional protections and summarily taking away our civil liberties. For example:

- Military tribunals for civilians and their unilateral description as “enemy combatants” violate our habeas corpus and other established protections.
- Eight thousand racially profiled “Muslim” detainees, including established, prominent American-born black Muslims, well known to African-American leadership, have been covered in secrecy.
- Incommunicado retentions can, by their very anonymity, involve almost any person of color: maybe an immigrant, maybe not.
- Carte blanche powers given the Justice Department also grant, by inference, arbitrary powers to law enforcement officials in general, and this cannot be good news for black and Hispanic males across the country.
- The abrogation of attorney-client protections cuts to the core of American democratic guarantees.

These assaults on civil liberties are a call to action to avert a headlong drive toward totalitarianism. We need to revisit Hannah Arendt’s landmark book, *The Ori-*

gins of Totalitarianism, to remind ourselves that the outer reaches of repression, when allowed to flourish unchecked, abridge everyone's rights, not just the rights of those targeted.

SEPTEMBER 11 HAS ALLOWED PUNITIVE, INTOLERANT POLICY TO CONTINUE

According to the operations research tools of “branch and bound analysis,” the tragedy of September 11 inadvertently provided an additional set of optional approaches for accomplishing some preexisting objectives. September 11 and the consequent homeland security responses raised considerably the possibility of success of policy actions that have their genesis in prior punitive, intolerant policy intentions. This outcome is more nonpartisan than is comfortable for many of us, given an apparent lack of opposition from either side of the congressional aisle. Such an outcome is further strengthened by the reluctance of a majority of lawmakers to take a strong stand against excessive and extreme measures that are moving forward without responsible checks and balances.

The federal government's failed “free market–tough state” agenda, as discussed by Elliott Currie in chapter 25, defines punitive, intolerant policies. A good example is control by the states of welfare administration through the vehicle of the 1996–1997 “welfare reform” legislation, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). A cursory look at emerging statistics reveals that the rolls have been reduced, but with draconian, cynical and—unfortunately—correctly predicted results. Those results include:

- Short-term jobs, often no longer than for three months, followed by more short-term jobs or serial unemployment
- No benefits, because of the temporary nature of the jobs
- Low-paying jobs, requiring that workers hold two and three simultaneously
- Reduced or curtailed housing subsidies
- No affordable child care, if any at all, especially needed by workers having two and three jobs
- No or few food stamps, or reduced food stamp allowances
- Lack of transportation money to get from one job to another

Now there is emerging a poorer, more marginal, less secure, “former welfare-recipient” class, whose children are poorer, hungrier, less supervised, and much more at risk. These children were left behind by a “Leave No Child Behind” policy. Welfare began as a program to reduce poverty, yet poverty has increased in the new millennium during “welfare reform.”

Other previously failed policies now finding fertile ground for stealth implementation include the shift in resources from social programs to the war machine and to upper-income tax brackets. These ideas originally also were proposed through former Speaker Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America."

In addition, post-September 11 responses have given fresh meaning to racial profiling, the new mechanism for neutralizing and suppressing the power and impact of racial and ethnic difference. Added to so-called antiterrorism profiling of "colored" people, as mentioned above, are recent studies by the Justice Policy Institute that show a growing, inverse, and destructive statistic. There are fully one-third more black men in prison than there are in colleges and universities. Given this equation, racial profiling emerges as the primary tool which is central to maintaining this inverse racial imbalance. Lock them up and keep them uneducated. In chapter 26, Marc Mauer provides more perspective on the negative racial impacts of incarceration.

We need to set forth alternative post-September 11 policies—solutions to persistent problems facing our society. The problem is not one of ignorance about sound remedies or about things that work but of failed moral resolve, a lack of old-fashioned intestinal fortitude, and the reality of the cynicism and the protective self-interest that drive American politics.

THE NATION NEEDS TERRORISM MANAGEMENT

The United States is undertaking an impossible and irrational task by defining "terrorism destruction" rather than "terrorism management" as an objective. Tough talk about capturing the terrorists "dead or alive" projects a "Gunfight at the OK Corral" mentality, more suited to the taming of the tumbleweed and tortilla flats of the nineteenth-century, wild American West than to the building of collaborations with other nations on whom the search for terrorists—through twenty-first-century, land-mined mountain passes and sand bunkers of the Middle East and Northern Africa—must depend. Hyperbole must be sacrificed to the higher imperative of world survival.

Stubborn ignorance of the complex ethnicity and culture of the non-Anglo Saxon world does not stand the United States in good stead. Just as we have matured as a nation to understand that a child is not an underdeveloped adult, so our government must realize that the developing world is not just a group of sun-drenched distant relatives who speak a foreign language.

For example, the arrogant rejection by the United States of any responsible official role as participants in the World Conference Against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa, during the month immediately preceding September 11, 2001, is well documented. America's bad behavior at the conference demonstrated how naive American foreign policy is about the symbolism that undergirds our expressed interest in international collaboration and global coexistence. Very junior administra-

tion representatives, without authority to do anything absent instructions from Washington, hung around the corridors of deliberations at the Durban conference prior to September 11. Immediately after the terrorism of September 11, top-level American diplomats seeking support for an antiterrorist initiative importuned the same Third World leaders who personally had navigated the conference corridors and had been snubbed by American officials the week before. The symbolic retribution was obvious and emphasized the need for global collaboration.

The preemptive invasion of Iraq and the pursuit of postwar policy against internal Iraqi resistance have captured the headlines of mainstream media and pushed aside calls for global collaboration, criticism of stealth policy that further disadvantages minorities within America, and discussion of voter and campaign-finance reform in response to the 2000 election.

One of our responses must be a laser focus on Congress, both the Senate and the House of Representatives, where most members are nearer the average American's economic and social profile. It is this body of individually elected, legitimately inaugurated, and constituent-accountable public officials that offers a truth-telling and fact-seeking venue. Both houses of Congress must ask, as a matter of conscience and of national security: Who knew what? When? How much?

Pronouncements questioning the loyalty and patriotism of anyone who deigns to challenge present policy should not be permitted to prevail. It is the proper province of members of Congress to enforce and protect the Constitution and the constitutional rights of all of their constituents. Those who seek alternative policies must demand that members of Congress carry out their sworn duties to investigate.

MEDIA ALLIES MUST UNITE

As we break the silence, we should not discount African-American media. There are 205 weekly publications that reflect the black voice. They reach a lot of people. They would reach more people if they had better funding, if people ran more ads in the paper, and if they could afford to hire and keep more reporters.

But people still read them, and we have not really incorporated them into the conscious litany of resources that can be used to communicate the alternative policies in this book. The African-American media already are on the same page as this volume. They are already talking about human-rights abuses, with good reason. It is a cliché but it is still true: When general America sneezes, African Americans get pneumonia. African Americans are especially sensitive to the abuses of the Patriot Act.

Three good examples of African-American media that need to be better utilized are the *Chicago Defender*, published by Vernon Jarrett, the distinguished journalist; the Baltimore and Washington *Afro-American* newspapers, published by a family that is now in its fourth generation in the publication; and the *Jackson Advocate*, which has been

bombed so many times that they have a new location every year, because they speak truth to power and they threaten people who do bad things. (Similarly, see Amy Goodman's account in chapter 33 of how the Ku Klux Klan bombed Pacifica Radio.)

Of course, regional media are not just African American. There are Latino media, Asian-American media, gay media, labor-affiliated media, and the media of organized religion. There are other media outlets that are secondary in the perception of most Americans. These other media outlets reach people whose voices are not now being heard, people who are not in the decision loop. All have well-developed communications networks. Local radio sometimes offers more liberal voices, operating without the corporate weight that burdens so many big-city newspapers. The progressive movement has a great many allies, and these allies have the ability to listen and to speak.

All of these allies need to be part of a coalition for alternatives to recent federal policy. They need to be among those organized for grassroots forums that continue to develop the alternatives to domestic, foreign, economic, and media policy as articulated on these pages.

Mainstream media need to be critiqued more aggressively following the recommendation of Robert McChesney, John Nichols, Amy Goodman, and Eli Pariser in chapters 30, 33, and 31. Reformers should meet with the editorial boards of mainstream media to press for alternatives. Advertising needs to be purchased in mainstream media, following the examples of MoveOn.org and TomPaine.org.

THE GOVERNMENT MUST RECOGNIZE OTHER CULTURES AND PEOPLES

In their work in the field of public administration, James March and Herbert Simon wrote about satisfactory versus optimal standards. Finding the optimal alternative is a radically different problem from finding a satisfactory alternative. An alternative is optimal if (1) there exists a set of criteria that permits all alternatives to be compared and (2) the alternative in question is preferred by these criteria to all other alternatives. But an alternative is satisfactory, or satisfies, if (1) there exists a set of criteria that describes minimally satisfactory alternatives and (2) the alternative in question meets or exceeds all of these criteria.

Most human decision making, whether individual or organizational, is concerned with the discovery and selection of satisfactory alternatives. Only in exceptional cases is it concerned with the discovery and selection of optimal alternatives. Since September 11, America has been satisfying when it should be optimizing. Unless the nation seeks optimizing alternatives, unless we are willing, actively willing, to think outside of the box, we will fail to stem the tide of pre-emptive imperialism. If that occurs, our lives will be profoundly different beyond the most morbid fantasies

which we entertain after September 11.

Many Americans suffer from what the psychologists call “cognitive dissonance.” It permits the understanding only of occurrences which we have experienced previously. It encourages us to interpret new, unfamiliar experiences through the prism of things we already know about. Cognitive dissonance can prevent our recognition of and respect for other cultures and people and cause us seriously to miscalculate how other people and other cultures interpret us and what we do.

The consequences of cognitive dissonance will literally kill us all if we do not intervene and carry out alternatives to present policy. We have the tools. What we need to do now is marshal our will.

The Bible says, “Without vision, the people will perish.” In “Where Do We Go From Here” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. encouraged vision: “The whole structure must be changed. A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will “thingify” things—make them into things. Therefore, they will exploit them and poor people generally. And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else and will have to use its military might to protect them.”

All of these problems are tied together. Let us therefore be dissatisfied, and then we’ll recognize that out of one blood God made all men to dwell on the face of the Earth. Let us be dissatisfied.

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