

Martin Luther King

WB

ADDRESS BY DR. CHEDDI JAGAN
AT THE COMMEMORATION OF THE
52ND BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
AT ZION BAPTIST CHURCH, NEW YORK
January 15, 1981

Dear Friends, Brothers & Sisters:

For me, it is an honour and a privilege to be associated with this beautiful event - the commemoration services of the 52nd Birth Anniversary of one of America's most illustrious sons, Martin Luther King, Jr. By any standards, he must rank with the greats of our time. His contribution was immeasurable, his courage immense. He shouldered his tasks, never flinching, in the noble traditions set by Frederick Douglass, Dr. W.E.B. Dubois, Paul Robeson and other fighters for freedom and liberation.

The magnitude of those tasks was well-appreciated by me. As a student at Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 1936-38 I had known what was meant by Jimcrow and segregation - the facilities from which blacks were excluded, the partition in the middle of inexpensive cinemas, separating Blacks and Whites; the seating of Blacks in the rear of a street-car as it moved across the state-line from Washington to East Virginia.

Blacks were regarded and treated as less than human. They were segregated and hemmed-in in ghettos. And, as I myself experienced, it was practically the same whether one was in Washington, in Harlem, New York, or in Chicago. My friend and room-mate Dr. Orrin Dummett shared with me a room in the Black district of Washington D.C. surrounding Howard University. But in the near North side of Chicago, we couldn't do so; he secured a room in a Church, but only on condition that he looked after the heating system of the church and presbytery.

Jimcrow and segregation had a deep impact on the Black American psyche - and, let me add, affected students like me, coming from a different, colonial background.

A concatenation of circumstances, national and international, worked on and inspired Martin Luther King to answer the call for leadership, to work and to break the chains that imprisoned body, mind and spirit.

These circumstances included the post-war anti-colonial struggle, the struggle for national liberation. In India, it was led by Gandhi's "non-cooperation and civil disobedience". In his college days, Martin Luther King had read much of and about Gandhi, and had heard Dr. Mordecai Johnson, President of Howard University in Washington, D.C., tell how the Mahatma had freed India by non-violent methods. Dr. Johnson was President in my time at Howard too.

Impetus was also given to the Civil Rights Movement in America by the convergence of the liberation struggles in Africa: in Kenya; in Ghana led by Kwame Nkrumah and in Guinea by Sekou Toure. Nkrumah had been associated with Dr. Du Bois in the Pan African movement. Cold war pressures in Egypt, Kenya, Ghana, Guinea and the non-aligned movement were similar to McCarthyite pressures against Paul Robeson and Dr. Du Bois. These pressures fuelled the urgency for change on the Establishment. Those who wielded power in America began to see that their credentials, sanctified in the American Constitution and symbolised by the Statue of Liberty, were wearing thin in the eyes of the rest of the world and that something had to be done about Jimcrowism and segregation at home if the USA was to maintain its leadership role in the post-war world.

It was the long, heroic struggle of the bus boycott in Montgomery that plummeted Martin Luther King into the leadership that was to enrich the Civil Rights Movement in later years and carve a niche for him in the history of his country that time can never erase. It also sparked another flame. When a white minister joined Dr. King in travelling up front on a bus after victory had been attained, and they took a ride side by side in Montgomery, it can be said to symbolise what, as the years rolled on, has become a fact of life wherever the struggle for freedom is being

waged: that resistance to oppression and injustice removes barriers of race, religion and, increasingly, social background: that believers and non-believers, that Marxists and non-Marxists, communists and non-communists, can and do work together for a common goal.

Dr. King's was not a mere activist's vision, with blinkers. He did not see Black liberation as black separatism; a posting of Black against White. In the same way that Gandhi sought Hindu-Moslem unity in India, and we in Guyana fought for Indian-African unity, which was attained in the 1950-53 period in the fight against British colonial rule and now is about to be attained against neo-colonial rule under President L.F.S. Burnham, Martin Luther King Jr. saw the necessity for Black-white unity against the monopoly-capitalist power structure. He saw that the attainment of emancipation, full integration and full citizenship, which the black people had been struggling for since the Emancipation Proclamation, could come about only with an anti-monopoly alliance of all progressive forces, Black and White.

Like a true revolutionary who sees the broad masses as the locomotive of history, Martin Luther King Jr. not only ministered to the needs of the down-trodden, but also moved to organise them. In the 1960's, his Southern Christian Leadership Conference had begun clearing the way for the organisation of the oppressed, the deprived and the poor, students and peace-fighters, and progressives of many ideological hues. He himself cautioned against philistinism and sectarianism in 1968 in an article honoring Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois. Said Dr. King:

"We cannot talk of Dr. DuBois without recognising that he was a radical all of his life. Some people would like to ignore the fact that he was a communist in his later years. It is worth noting that Abraham Lincoln warmly welcomed the support of Karl Marx during the Civil War and corresponded with him freely. In contemporary life the English speaking world has no difficulty with the fact that Sean O'Casey was a literary giant of the twentieth century and a communist, or that Pablo Neruda is generally considered the greatest (living) poet, though he also served in the Chilean Senate as a Communist. It is time to cease muting the fact that Dr. DuBois was a genius and chose to be a Communist. Our irrational obsessive anti-communism has led us into ~~xxx~~ too many quagmires to be retained as if it were a mode of scientific thinking".

This is important as anti-communist hysteria has become the familiar weapon of the oppressors and reactionaries. In 1953, when the British landed troops in Guyana, overthrew the PPP government, and imprisoned me, they said that we were communists. When Anglo-American imperialism and the CIA joined forces with Burnham and destabilised the PPP government in 1964, they again said Jagan was communist and that we wanted to make Guyana into a second Cuba. When the racist-fascists of South Africa imprisoned Nelson Mandela and later the US Cold Warriors persecuted Sister Angela Davis, as they had persecuted Paul Robeson and others, anti-communism was used as a pretext.

I recall my long association with Paul Robeson and being at London Airport to greet him when finally he was allowed to travel abroad. A year earlier when Dr. DuBois had been prevented from leaving the USA, I had the honour of stepping into his reserved vacant seat from London to Accra for Ghana's independence celebrations.

The same cowardly veil of anti-communism has not masked their vile assassination of Lumumba and Cabral, Che Guevara and Allende, and our own beloved Walter Rodney, whose precious life was snuffed out in mid-1980 by the imperialist-backed PNC regime.

Dr. King fought for peace. He applauded when Mohamed Ali rejected his draft call-up, and in 1967 he denounced the war in Vietnam. Of that war he said -

"Somehow this madness must cease. We must stop now . . . I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam . . . The initiative to stop it must be ours."

On UN Human Rights Day, 1964, in his acceptance statement after receiving the award of the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. King said -

"I accept the Nobel Prize for Peace at a moment when twenty-one million Negroes of the United States of America are engaged in a creative battle to end the long night of racial injustices . . .

. . . I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind . . . I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.

I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hall of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality . . . I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits . . . I still believe that WE SHALL OVERCOME!"

On April 10, 1968, just six days after his assassination, part of the dream Dr. King dreamed came true - the long-delayed Civil Rights Act was passed. A most notable breach in the walls had been achieved. The intervening period - between 1964 and 1968 in America - was indeed one of "domestic fury and fierce civil strife" which was not Dr. King's preference and far from his prescription. But the militancy of the civil right struggle intermingled with the anti-Vietnam War feeling in the country; and fighters for Black liberation were often indistinguishable from or identified with the anti-Vietnam war sentiments of the people.

Vietnam was part of that third world for which Dr. King's concern was clearly expressed: "Let us be dissatisfied until our brother of the third world -- Asia, Africa and Latin America -- will no longer be a victim of imperialist exploitation, but will be lifted from the long night of poverty, illiteracy and disease".

Dr. Martin Luther King not only had a dream; he worked towards its realisation. As Congressman Ron Dellums beautifully put it: "The man King saw evil and tried to correct it. He saw immorality and tried to right it. He saw suffering and tried to end it. He saw war and tried to stop it . . ."

Dr. King was not only a man of ideas; he was equally a man of action. His commitment to genuine multi-racial unity in America, his steadfastness to the struggle for people's power, his faith in the masses, resulted in the military-industrial establishment trembling in paranoic convulsions. That is why they killed him. But they cannot kill his ideas. They can never kill what he stood for, which is winning out all over the world: national liberation, self-determination, social justice. It won out in Indo-China and in Africa. It is winning out in our America.

Copyright © Nadira Jagan-Brancier 2000

Revolutionary Cuba, Grenada and Nicaragua are living testimony that the tidal wave of social justice cannot be held back. And like a fire, Dr. King's dream is circling around the globe. It will one day descend also on this land where Dr. King dreamt his dream of a new world of peace and plenty.

Because of his commitment and steadfastness, he was cut down in the prime of his life. They killed him; but in every demand for equality, every demonstration for social justice, peace and freedom, Martin Luther King Jr. lives.

We pledge to struggle in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr. That is the greatest tribute that we in Guyana can pay to his revered memory.