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Racism, Resources and Nuclear Weapons: Some Reflections on the Rodney King Case

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An essay written in 1992 after the conclusion of the first trial of the police officers accused in the Rodney King beating at the request of the Military Production Network (since re-named Alliance for Nuclear Accountability)

The near-total acquittal of the police officers in the Rodney King case and the angry destruction that followed emboldened President de Klerk of South Africa to remind the United States to attend to its own problems of racial injustice and human rights before instructing others. The advice may be ill-mannered, but it poses some fundamental questions we must not shirk. Is the legacy of slavery and the institutionalization of racism that followed its formal abolition only incidental to the operation of society as a whole today? Or does it still basically distort and pervert the core values of equality and freedom that we cherish?

Did the conquest, genocide and broken treaties by which the lands on which we live were obtained create a negative aspect to the national character that still persists? Or is it merely a fading stain that poses questions for ivory-tower academics to worry about in this five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage? In other words, must there be some restructuring of the political, military, and economic institutions of this country and of some of its dominant social values? If that is true then no amount of effort directed at rebuilding the devastated areas of Los Angeles will address the principal underlying issue: how to cure the disease of racism in the United States.

Many Whites argue that they did not participate in the system of slavery or in the grave injustices that went with the expropriation of Native American land. This is true, and indeed, many Whites have helped fight the ills that resulted from them. Why, then, should they bear the burdens of programs such as affirmative action, or pay high taxes to cure ills that seem to resist solution?

Had exploitation and marginalization of many ethnic groupings in this country and of most people in Third World at large ended definitively, then these arguments would carry the day. Indeed, there would be little basis for racism. But the wanton beating of Rodney King and verdict of the jury are expressions of the violence and moral corruption that is endemic in the economic and social system as a whole. Let us look at the evidence.

Resources and Violence

Since the Second World War, five hundred million children around the world, mostly in the Third World, but also here in the United States, have died needless deaths for want of simple things such as food, clean water and elementary medical care. Forty thousand children around the world still die that way every day. Yet there is plenty of food in the world to go around and the resources that it would take to alleviate the worst aspects of these ills are a small fraction of the world's trillion-dollar-a-year expenditures on armaments.

There is a link between the deaths of so many children and huge military budgets. From local police in villages in the Third World to nuclear weapons threats, military budgets provide the instruments of coercion and violence that are one essential element in perpetuating the enormous poverty that coexists with a surfeit of goods and wastefulness. A world full of weapons is one expression of the reality that profit and consumption of the rich and powerful have a higher priority and a far greater pull on political will than the needs of the alleviation of suffering and poverty.

U.S. governmental and corporate policies have led the international military and economic alliance, across race and nationality, in order to create and maintain the structure of this violence in the period after the Second World War. One of the main methods of U.S. policy has been to link up with the most convenient local forces, democratic or dictatorial, to establish or maintain U.S. corporate economic hegemony. This has included the training of armed forces and military dictators, the covert overthrow of democratically elected governments, and the threat of the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear Third World countries. These elements have often been combined. For instance, U.S. nuclear-capable bombers were put on alert as the CIA was assisting the overthrow of the democratically-elected Arbenz government in Guatemala in 1954. And the institutions representing the rich in the Third World have often actively sought and collaborated in this system, which continues to result in the devastation of their own countries and people.

U.S. policy was spelled out in National Security Council Memorandum number 68 (NSC-68), in 1950. The policy of containment that it developed was far beyond mere deterrence of a Soviet nuclear attack on the U.S. or even a Soviet military attack on Europe. "Containment" according to this policy was linked to keeping the Soviet influence out of the rest of the world, and fostering an economic system more conducive to U.S. capitalism — "attempting to create a healthy international community," as NSC-68 put it. NSC-68 advocated being ready for everything from local conventional wars to local nuclear wars to a war of "global annihilation" should the U.S. not be able to "hold" any of the "critical points" in the world within its own orbit relative to the Soviet Union, directly or indirectly.

The history of the implementation of this policy shows that in practice every government (and even institutions within countries such as political parties and labor unions), no matter how democratic, that sought local control over resources so as to exclude or even moderately limit multinational corporations was vilified, subverted and opposed vigorously as "communist," while governments that allowed an "open door" to foreign capital were supported even when they were viciously dictatorial. Indeed, the U.S. has been instrumental in setting up or helping create many dictatorial governments.

The uranium of the Congo and Namibia, the gold and diamonds of South Africa and other African countries, the oil of Iran and Arab countries like Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Libya, were among the resources whose control occupied a large portion of U.S. policy, not only for itself. These resources were also at the center of post-war recovery in Europe and Japan. They were essential to the success of the Marshall Plan in rebuilding Western Europe.

Many of the nuclear war scenarios that the Pentagon used for planning purposes started with a crisis of control of oil in the Persian Gulf. It was the quest for control of these same resources that caused the U.S. and Britain to overthrow the elected Iranian government, headed by Mossadegh, in 1953 and replace it by a pliant dictator. This was the "Shah of Iran" who had initially been put there as Britain's puppet when his father supported the fascists during World War II. Through terror and torture, the Shah made protest

outside the mosques essentially impossible. This led to a radical Islamic revolution in 1979; the crisis that followed has not yet ended. Oil loomed so large in these events that James Schlesinger, who had occupied various positions in government, including head of the CIA, Secretary of Defense and Secretary of Energy, told Congress that the oil crisis of 1979 was more serious than that of 1973. He also advocated U.S. military action in Iran to support the Shah.

This pattern of exploitation of resources and cheap labor by the U.S. and Western Europe was designed to keep social and economic conflict far away from the areas where Whites lived or came to occupy and make their own. It was a pattern that emerged slowly, over a hundred years or so, after the poor in Europe became very angry and began beheading the rich and the powerful during the French revolution in 1789.

But aims and policies so cynical and inhumane could not fail to be reflected in the home countries of their originators. It is difficult to compartmentalize immorality. When profit and power are put before people (rather than in their service) then we should expect to see expressions of this towards all people, including White people. Examples abound all over the world. The nuclear establishment provides many graphic illustrations.

The Nuclear Weapons Establishment

Nuclear threats that were used against others have rained down radioactivity on the U.S. When the Pentagon was looking for a site to test nuclear weapons on the continental U.S., it chose the one in Nevada because it controlled the land, though that land belongs by treaty to the Western Shoshone people. As another example, in the 1950s the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) decided not to improve ventilation in uranium mines, which had a disproportionately large number of Navajo miners, thereby allowing a build-up of radon in the mines so that it could better study the effects of radiation on health.

There were effects on White people also. The AEC knew full well that by choosing a nuclear weapons testing site in Nevada, the tests would cause fallout of radioactivity over nearly the whole country because the prevailing winds were from the west. Indeed, one of aims of the nuclear establishment was "reeducation" of people so that their "hysterical or alarmist complex" towards radiation could be "corrected." Safety discussions had a goal of making the public "feel at home with neutrons trotting around."

The University of California gets commissions for designing nuclear weapons at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory and Los Alamos National Laboratory. A 1960 editorial in the engineering alumni magazine of its Berkeley campus, opined that "major birth defects" in six thousand children from atomic fallout could be justified in the face of the of the "need" for nuclear weapons for deterrence and especially for use in "brush fire" wars, such as the one in Korea.

The Atomic Energy Commission experimentally released radioactive iodine-131 from its Hanford, Washington plant which wound up in children's milk. It rained down well over half-a-million pounds of uranium from its Fernald, Ohio plant, called the Feed Materials Production Center, which had a water tower with a logo resembling that of the Purina company of pet food fame, making it appear benign. It denied benefits to sick veterans who had obeyed orders, marching into ground zero after atomic tests. It experimented on pilots, the cream of the armed forces, by making them fly though mushroom clouds

shortly after atomic tests, to see if they could fight in nuclear wars. And it refused to recognize that the diseases and suffering of the downwinders and atomic veterans could be connected to their exposure from weapons production and testing. While some downwinders and veterans have seen compensation legislation passed, that is still the case with the vast majority of workers and people living near the weapons plants. All this was done, often in contravention of laws, to a predominantly White population in the name of "national security."

The Inner Cities

When the actions of public policy are dominated by the goals of profit and power, other ends will fall by the wayside when they are inconvenient, almost as a matter of habit. One connection between nuclear threats and the beating of Rodney King is the unjustified use of force by governments on people. Such use of force has occurred in other systems than capitalism, of course, notably in the former Soviet Union. A lack of accountability to the people is the common thread between them.

There is another connection. Military forces around the world, but most notably those in Europe, Japan and the U.S., maintain control over the borders of the wealthy areas, keeping impoverished and marginalized people out. With the fall of the Berlin wall, which the Soviet system used to keep educated people locked in, this policy of locking people out has become more transparent in Europe. In the U.S., it is ever so clear in the militarized border with Mexico, complete with searchlights, not far from Los Angeles. The goods and resources and cheap labor from the Third World are welcome, and even obtained by force, but the people must be kept out, except as convenient.

It is difficult for governments and the dominant sections of society to admit to themselves, much less to others, that the content of their deeds is at fundamental variance with their professed ideals of freedom and equality. Racism is one way for those who benefit from unjust arrangements to rationalize away and project onto the oppressed a more difficult, complex and disturbing reality. Certainly, the problems of the Third World or of inner cities are not caused by external forces alone. There are internal forces, such as drugs and violence that are basic as well. But there is a dynamic by the which negative internal and external forces interact. The unbridled use of force and the financial and military aspects that are involved in it form an essential part of that negative dynamic, as does the failure of society to deal squarely with the problem of racism. The fact that President Bush was elected partly on the basis of a racist advertisement (the "Willie Horton" ad) is a stark symbol of the external factors that drive the hopelessness that many young people in the inner cities feel, which is one cause of a negative internal dynamic.

The inner cities of the U.S. are a kind of internal Third World; local police forces execute an internal military policy. One important factor to keep in mind is that inner cities in the U.S. now consist mainly of people for whom the larger economy has little use in the production of profit, having found ample cheap labor in the Third World. Therefore, a military containment of the inner cities, rather than exploitation in any old-fashioned sense, is now a principal objective. This policy has many similarities with the U.S. "pacification" program during the Viet Nam war.

Inner cities have now become heavily armed, frustrated and violent places without hope for many of their residents. Police, prisons, and society at large have become more brutal in the policy of containment as

even as they grow more fearful. As the U.S. experience in Viet Nam shows, such policies have a way of becoming uncontrollably violent, immoral and unjust.

Violence, Profit and Accountability

Like people without hope in many parts of the world, young men in U.S. inner cities have noticed that control over property can be had with armed force. Is there a moral difference between setting up and arming dictators in foreign countries for the sake of profit and taking local property by a stick-up? Is there a moral difference between selling billions of dollars of armaments to torturers and dictators who use them to kill thousands of people and keep millions in thrall and selling drugs and committing drive-by murders in the street?

While President Bush decries the looting, many have noticed he did not similarly decry the wanton looting by Michael Milken that contributed to the Savings and Loan crisis, and cost thousands of people their jobs while he made more than five hundred million dollars as a single year's compensation from the junk bond firm of Drexel Burnham Lambert, headquartered in Los Angeles. Young people without hope of a decent life around the world have noticed the utterly amoral arming of both sides in the Iran-Iraq war, and the cynical turns from arming and assistance to Saddam Hussein to war against him to a de facto acceptance of his remaining in power at the end of the war so that insurgents fighting to be liberated would not come to control the oil, among other cynical reasons.

The location of the inner cities inside wealthy countries introduces objectives other than military containment — namely, the alleviation of poverty and unemployment. These issues become more acute when the larger society is reminded through dramatic events, such as those that followed the videotaping of the beating of Rodney King, of the potential for a more general destructiveness that stems from the hopelessness that many young people in the inner cities feel.

Past programs have been based on a mixture of containment of and charity towards African-Americans. They are unlikely to address the real needs of the people they are directed to — how could they, when even the basic communication between the presumed benefactors and the beneficiaries is missing? Indeed, one of the basic elements that has been missing from that dialog is that recognition in policy that people who live in the inner cities know their problems, have ideas about their solutions, and have the leadership that it will take to address them. The respect that a dialog that begins with such a premise implies has been an ingredient of some local successes; its absence from policy in the country at large has been one essential component of the failure to address the problems of the inner cities.

Finally, programs directed at inner cities do not exist in a vacuum. They are part of a larger system of policies. How can programs address the long-term issues of social stability and harmony, health care and job security that all of us need to live safe and satisfying lives, when such a huge proportion of the resources of the country continues to be devoted to military spending? This spending parallels in foreign policy the emphasis on police and prisons for inner cities, while at the same depriving us all of essential resources for peaceful purposes.

A New Direction

There is another direction, at once more practical, moral, and hopeful which can help us get out of this mess. We must confront together the fundamental problems of the U.S. and global economies that have given rise to so much injustice, suffering and environmental devastation. We must fundamentally reevaluate programs inspired by fear and guilt that make White society put combinations of money and police and prisons into inner cities, hoping that somehow the basic problems will go away. Instead, we must address the needs of particular communities and areas in the context of the larger community in the country and the world. This will help us address the root causes of the persistence of racism, violence, and misery which lie in the inequities of the larger global social and economic system.

There is ample precedent for this great common enterprise. People of all ethnic backgrounds have struggled shoulder-to-shoulder in this country and throughout the world for justice, decency and a modicum of well-being for everyone. In the nineteenth century, when there were signs in New York City that proclaimed "Irish and dogs not allowed," Blacks and Irish Americans struggled side-by-side in unions for better wages and working conditions, until racism divided them late in the nineteenth century. Blacks and Whites fought for civil rights, and some died together in that struggle, far above the color barriers that had been set up for them. Whites did not hesitate to follow Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a leader of all the people of this country, and not only of African-Americans. Millions of Blacks, Whites, soldiers, pacifists, draft resisters and other civilians struggled together to end the Viet Nam war.

We have common problems enough. The lack of good schools, safe neighborhoods, and health insurance affects Blacks disproportionately, but it affects everyone. So does the shortage of well-paid jobs. The degradation of the environment may affect communities of color disproportionately, but few breathe truly clean air everyday, or are confident that it will be better for their children. While toxic dumps are located disproportionately in rural areas and in communities of color, few can escape the ill-effects of toxic chemicals in our midst. Even the lack of leadership in Washington, corrupted by military and corporate machinery that greases elections with copious sums of money, has become a pressing common problem.

There is a tradition of struggle at the grassroots that can provide the basis for success. The examples above show that it has already done so in many areas. Just in the recent past that tradition has helped to shut down nuclear weapons production in this country. It has slowed the deadly international trade in toxic wastes. It has spawned a movement for safe energy and sane lifestyles. In the Sanctuary movement, of the 1980s, many Americans, including Whites, provided shelter to Central Americans fleeing war and violence, thereby opposing the U.S. government at considerable risk and cost to themselves. And millions of Americans, Black and White, worked together to assist the struggle of the people of South Africa against apartheid, which is probably the real cause of President de Klerk's peevish comments about the Rodney King case.

A common struggle, moved by the value that everyone has a right to a decent and peaceful life, good government and a healthy environment, can provide the common bonds to enable us to overcome racism in this country, and exploitation around the world.

Notes:

1. Arjun Makhijani is president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research in Takoma Park, Maryland. Rose Milligan of the Peace Development Fund and Daniel Ellsberg provided many useful suggestions to improve this article, though the author, of course, assumes full

responsibility for its contents. He is the author of From Global Capitalism to Economic Justice, Apex Press, New York, 1992, which was re-published by Apex Press together with a new essay on freedom as Manifesto for Global Democracy in 2004. Proofreading corrections were made prior to recirculation in 2006; otherwise the essay is unchanged from the one written in 1992, so that current references, such as the status of legislation, the person to whom the term "President Bush" applies, etc., refer to that year. ? Return