

When The Saints Go Marching Out

By Arundhati Roy

This is the 40th anniversary of the March on Washington, when Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I have a dream" speech. Perhaps it's time to reflect — again — on what has become of that dream.

It's interesting how icons, when their time has passed, are commodified and appropriated (some voluntarily, others involuntarily) to promote the prejudice, bigotry and inequity they battled against. But then in an age when everything's up for sale, why not icons? In an era when all of humanity, when every creature on God's earth, is trapped between the International Monetary Fund (IMF) cheque book and the American cruise missile, can icons stage a getaway?

Martin Luther King Jr. is part of a trinity. So it's hard to think of him without two others elbowing their way into the picture: Mohandas Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. The three high priests of non-violent resistance. Together they represent (to a greater or lesser extent) the 20th Century's non-violent liberation struggles (or should we say "negotiated settlements"?): Of the colonised against coloniser, former slave against slave owner.

Today the elites of the very societies and peoples in whose name the battles for freedom were waged use them as mascots to entice new masters.

Mohandas, Mandela, Martin.

India, South Africa, the United States.

Broken dreams, betrayal, nightmares.

A quick snapshot of the supposedly "Free World" today.

Last March in India, in Gujarat — Gandhi's Gujarat — right-wing Hindu mobs murdered 2,000 Muslims in a chillingly efficient orgy of violence. Women were gang-raped and burned alive. Muslim tombs and shrines were razed to the ground. More than a hundred and fifty thousand Muslims have been driven from their homes. The economic base of the community has been destroyed. Eye-witness accounts and several fact-finding commissions have accused the State Government and the police of collusion in the violence. I was present at a meeting where a group of victims kept wailing, "Please save us from the police! That's all we ask... "

In December 2002, the same State Government was voted back to office. Narendra Modi, who was widely accused of having orchestrated the riots, has embarked on his second term as Chief Minister of Gujarat. On August 15, Independence Day, he hoisted the Indian flag before thousands of cheering people. In a gesture of menacing symbolism he wore the black Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) cap — which proclaims him as a member of the Hindu nationalist guild that has not been shy of admiring Hitler and his methods.

One hundred and thirty million Muslims — not to mention the other minorities, Dalits, Christians, Sikhs, Adivasis — live in India under the shadow of Hindu nationalism.

As his confidence in his political future brims over, Narendra Modi, master of seizing the political moment, invited Nelson Mandela to Gujarat to be the Chief Guest at the celebration of Gandhi's birth anniversary on October 2. Fortunately the invitation was turned down.

And what of Mandela's South Africa? Otherwise known as the Small Miracle, the Rainbow Nation of God? South Africans say that the only miracle they know of is how quickly the rainbow has been privatised, sectioned off and auctioned to the highest bidders. Within two years of taking office in 1994, the African National Congress genuflected with hardly a caveat to the Market God. In its rush to replace Argentina as neo-liberalism's poster boy, it has instituted a massive programme of privatisation and structural adjustment. The government's promise to re-distribute agricultural land to 26 million landless people has remained in the realm of dark humour. While 60 per cent of the population remains landless, almost all agricultural land is owned by 60,000 white farmers. (Small wonder that George Bush on his recent visit to South Africa referred to Thabo Mbeki as his "point man" on the Zimbabwe issue.) Post-apartheid, the income of 40 per cent of the poorest black families has diminished by about 20 per cent. Two million have been evicted from their homes. Six hundred die of AIDS every day. Forty per cent of the population is unemployed and that number is rising sharply. The corporatisation of basic services has meant that millions have been disconnected from water and electricity.

A fortnight ago, I visited the home of Teresa Naidoo in Chatsworth, Durban. Her husband had died the previous day of AIDS. She had no money for a coffin. She and her two small children are HIV-positive. The Government disconnected her water supply because she was unable to pay her water bills and her rent arrears for her tiny council flat. The Government dismisses her troubles and those of millions like her as a "culture of non-payment".

In what ought to be an international scandal, this same government has officially asked the judge in a U.S court case to rule against forcing companies to pay reparations for the role they played during apartheid. It's reasoning is that reparations — in other words justice — will discourage foreign investment. So South Africa's poorest must pay apartheid's debts, so that those who amassed profit by exploiting black people during apartheid can profit even more from the goodwill generated by Nelson Mandela's Rainbow Nation of God. President Thabo Mbeki is still called "comrade" by his colleagues in government. In South Africa, Orwellian parody goes under the genre of Real Life.

What's left to say about Martin Luther King Jr.'s America? Perhaps it's worth asking a simple question: Had he been alive today, would he have chosen to stay warm in his undisputed place in the pantheon of Great Americans? Or would he have stepped off his pedestal, shrugged off the empty hosannas and walked out onto the streets to rally his people once more?

On April 4, 1967, one year before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at the Riverside Church in New York City. That evening he said (I can only paraphrase him because his public speeches are now private property) that he could never again speak out against the violence of those living in the ghettos without first speaking out against his own government, which he called the greatest purveyor of violence in the modern world.

Has anything happened in the 36 years between 1967 and 2003 that would have made him change his mind? Or would he be doubly confirmed in his opinion after the overt and covert wars and acts of mass killing that successive governments of his country, both Republican and Democrat, have engaged in since then?

Let's not forget that Martin Luther King Jr. didn't start out as a militant. He began as a Persuader, a Believer. In 1964 he won the Nobel Peace Prize. He was held up by the media as an exemplary black leader, unlike, say, the more militant Malcolm X. It was only three years later that Martin Luther King Jr. publicly connected the U.S. government's racist war in Vietnam with its racist

policies at home. In 1967, in an uncompromising, militant speech, he denounced the American invasion of Vietnam. He spoke with heart-rending eloquence about the cruel irony of the TV images of black and white boys burning the huts of a poor village in brutal solidarity, killing and dying together for a nation that wouldn't even seat them together at the same tables. His denunciation of the war in Vietnam was treated as an act of perfidy. He was condemned by his former allies and attacked viciously by the American press. The Washington Post wrote, "He has diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country and his people."

The New York Times had some wonderful counter-logic to offer the growing anti-war sentiment among black Americans: "In Vietnam," it said, "the Negro, for the first time, has been given the chance to do his share of fighting for his country."

It omitted to mention Martin Luther King Jr.'s observation that there were twice as many blacks as whites dying in Vietnam in proportion to their number in the population. It omitted to mention that when the body bags came home, some of the black soldiers were buried in segregated graveyards in the South.

What would Martin Luther King Jr. say today about the fact that federal statistics show that African Americans, who count for 12 per cent of America's population, make up 21 per cent of the total armed forces and 29 per cent of the U.S. army?

Perhaps he would take a positive view and look at this as affirmative action at its most effective?

What would he say about the fact that having fought so hard to win the right to vote, today 1.4 million African Americans, which means 13 per cent of all voting age black people, have been disenfranchised because of felony convictions?

But the most pertinent question of all is: What would Martin Luther King Jr. say to those black men and women who make up a fifth of America's armed forces and close to a third of the U.S. army?

To black soldiers fighting in Vietnam, Martin Luther King Jr. said they ought to understand America's role in Vietnam and consider the option of conscientious objection.

In April 1967 at a massive anti-war demonstration in Manhattan, Stokely Carmichael described the draft as "white people sending black people to make war on yellow people in order to defend land they stole from red people."

What's changed? Except of course the compulsory draft has become a poverty draft — a different kind of compulsion.

Would Martin Luther King Jr. say today that the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan are in any way morally different from the U.S. government's invasion of Vietnam? Would he say that it was just and moral to participate in these wars? Would he say that it was right for the U.S. government to have supported a dictator like Saddam Hussein politically and financially for years while he committed his worst excesses against Kurds, Iranians and Iraqis in the 1980s, when he was an ally against Iran?

And that when that dictator began to chafe at the bit, as Saddam Hussein did, would he say it was right to go to war against Iraq, to fire several hundred tonnes of depleted uranium into its fields, to degrade its water supply systems, to institute a regime of economic sanctions that results in the death of half a million children, to use United Nations weapons inspectors to force it to disarm, to mislead the public about an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction that could be

deployed in a matter of minutes, and then, when the country was on its knees, to send in an invading army to conquer it, occupy it, humiliate its people, take control of its natural resources and infrastructure, and award contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars to American corporations like Bechtel?

When he spoke out against the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King Jr. drew some connections that many these days shy away from making. He explicitly described the interconnections between racism, economic exploitation and war. Would he tell people today that it is right for the U.S. government to export its cruelties — its racism, its economic bullying and its war machine to poorer countries?

Would he say that black Americans must fight for their fair share of the American pie and the bigger the pie, the better their share — never mind the terrible price that the people of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America are paying for the American Way of Life? Would he support the grafting of the Great American Dream onto his own dream, which was a very different, very beautiful sort of dream? Or would he see that as a desecration of his memory and everything that he stood for?

The black American struggle for civil rights gave us some of the most magnificent political fighters, thinkers, public speakers and writers of our times. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, James Baldwin, and of course the marvellous, magical, mythical Muhammad Ali.

Who has inherited their mantle?

Could it be the likes of Colin Powell? Condoleeza Rice? Michael Powell?

They're the exact opposite of icons or role models. They appear to be the embodiment of black peoples' dreams of material success, but in actual fact they represent the Great Betrayal. They are the liveried doormen guarding the portals of the glittering ballroom against the press and swirl of the darker races. Their role and purpose is to be trotted out by the Bush administration looking for brownie points in its racist wars and African safaris.

If these are black America's new icons, then the old ones must be dispensed with because they do not belong in the same pantheon. If these are black America's new icons, then perhaps the haunting image that Mike Marqusee describes in his beautiful book *Redemption Song* — an old Muhammad Ali afflicted with Parkinson's disease, advertising a retirement pension — symbolises what has happened to black Power, not just in the United States but the world over.

If black America genuinely wishes to pay homage to its real heroes, and to all those unsung people who fought by their side — if the world wishes to pay homage, then it's time to march on Washington. Again. Keeping hope alive — for all of us.

This is the text for a 15-minute radio essay broadcast by Radio 4, BBC.

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