

Civil Rights and African-Americans Today

Wyatt Tee Walker

First, let me say that I am grateful for the invitation from Professor Ichirō Iwano, Director of the Center for American Studies. I am also indebted to my dear friend of this city, Dr. Hisashi Kajiwara for making Professor Iwano aware of my presence in Japan at this time. I am honored to be on your campus and trust that what I plan to say to you will be informative and stimulating.

The assigned subject is very broad and embraces a period of history that parallels my entire adult life, a little more than a full generation. The civil rights of people of African ancestry did not become a matter of paramount concern until after World War II. Since then, the issue of racism in the United States has been at flood-tide for most of my lifetime. The attention it has received in the circles of power in America has been directly proportionate to the energy and resources generated by the victims of racism- African-Americans, Hispanics and the original Americans- the American Indians.

I am sorry to report to you that racism in the United States is worse today than it was when I began my public career as a civil rights activist over forty years ago. The deeper racism is, the narrower the ground for civil and human rights for African-Americans and all those similarly situated. To fully appreciate the poor climate of race relations in the United States today requires some word about the historical background of the racism peculiar to the United States, some analysis of

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what has transpired in recent days and a word about the significance of the resistance to racism that is observable.

Roots of Racism / Atlantic Slave Trade

What is the origin of the beast of racism in the United States? Careful inspection of the history of the U. S. will reveal that the racism peculiar to that body politic is the Atlantic Slave Trade that prevailed from the 16th through the 19th century. It must be understood that the context of Civil rights in the United States is the resistance to racism by its chief victims-African-Americans. That racism was institutionalized by the Atlantic slave trade mentioned above that spanned three centuries. The slave traffic was sanctified by European Christians. Roman Catholic priests sprinkled holy water on the bows of slave ships as they departed for the West coasts of Africa to pick up their human cargo for the voyage to the "New World". The sea explorers who opened the Americas to European colonial expansion financed their enterprise on the huge profits of their cargoes of human flesh.

In the early days of sea exploration, the plunder of Africa was the search for gold and ivory. The profit of flesh-peddling became so profitable that the sea merchants virtually abandoned the quest for gold and ivory. Thus was developed the "Golden Triangle" of trade. England, Portugal and Spain became masters of the seaways with their armadas of ships that plied the mighty Atlantic with paying cargo for each leg of the journey.

These merchant ships left European ports with finished goods which they transported to the coasts of West Africa. There for beads and fabrics they traded for human beings which filled the need for cheap (free) labor in the islands and the colonies of the Americas. After discharging their victims at the primary ports of entry of North America, the islands of the Caribbean and Salvador d'Bahia in Brazil, their ships were re-loaded with the raw goods from the Americas for the third paying leg of the raw goods from the Americas for the third paying leg of the journey. Enormous profits were derived from this flesh-peddling.

Greed induced slave captains to use every nook and cranny of their vessels for a human body. Africans were stacked below decks like cord wood, manacled together like animals for the voyage that sometimes

lasted three months. It was not unusual for half of the human cargo to perish from the ravages of dysentery and the accompanying cruelty of the slave ship captains. The horrific details of the Middle Passage are disclosed in the work of W. E. B. Dobois, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. As unconscionable as was the slaughter of six million Jews with barely an outcry from the Euro-American community, how much more unconscionable the genocide of slavery concealed in American history! By conservative estimate, upward of fourteen million Africans were imported into the Americas during the Atlantic slave trade. For every African who reached the Americas alive, four died in the machinery of slavery at one end or the other of the traffic or in the dreadful Middle Passage. Simple arithmetic discloses that at least *sixty million people* were lost from West Africa in less than three hundred years—a holocaust on a scaled unmatched in recorded history.

Much of the loss of life had to do with resistance to enslavement. Before the ships were loaded in Africa, our ancestors resisted and were killed. Once on board, many fell into melancholia so deep, refusing to eat or drink, they perished on board. Others chose at any opportunity to jump overboard and perish among the sharks rather than remain slaves. Pregnant African women drove sharpened bamboo sticks into their abdomens to kill the unborn child rather than have it be born a slave. At the ports of entry, many risked escape only to be maimed or killed for the attempt. Slavery was repugnant to our ancestors and they resisted at any and every opportunity.

A word needs to be said about the nature of slavery in colonial America. It was without question, the most brutal and oppressively cruel form of human bondage in the history of the Western world. Historian Kenneth Stampp concluded that slavery in the New World was *a social system as coercive as any yet known erected on the foundation of the most implacable race consciousness yet observed in any society*. Not only did the Church sanctify slavery but it ordained on theological grounds that these New World Africans were less than human and thus beyond the pale of conversion to Christianity.

A later accommodation was made early in the 18th century as a part of the strategy to make “better slaves” and the catechism was introduced to *convert the heathen*. The strategy backfired. The introduction of the slaves to the religion of Jesus Christ had the opposite effect. The restless-

ness of the slave community became more visible. Runaways and rebellions increased. Insurrection was a more frequent occurrence so much so that stringent prohibitions were imposed upon any and all religious practices of the slave population. By practice and then by legal statute, it was firmly established early in the 18th century that there was no right of a slave that any white person was bound to respect. An act of simple insubordination could easily result in death. American slavery became the most oppressive form of slavery the world has every known.

Some revisionist historians have claimed that there was really no need for the bloody conflict of the Civil War that tore our nation apart. They concluded that slavery was an inefficient system and with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in America, slavery would have come to an end by itself. More recent studies of the cliometricians (computer studies of the economics of slavery) have proved these conclusions to be in grave error. The cliometric studies proved slavery to be very efficient and could have lasted to the present had no Civil War been joined.

The most damaging legacy of the slave era is that white America developed a rationale for slavery to justify it. A part of that rationale was theological. Africans and their kin were decreed less than human by means of tortuous biblical logic that was buttressed by legal statute. The stamp of inferiority was indelibly placed upon all who had a simple drop of African blood.

The post-Civil War era did much to replace the physical slavery with a psychological slavery (segregation) *sanctioned by the Supreme Court of the nation (Plessy vs. Ferguson)*! The blood-letting of the Civil War in which tens of thousands of the nations best men perished and the reality that the bitterness of the conflict did not dissolve until a hundred years later might suggest that racism and color prejudice had been put to flight. Not so! There is a restlessness on race in the United States today that frightening.

Cyclical Character of Racism in the U. S.

Let me share with you a chart that might be instructive in understanding the cyclical character of racism in America.

19th CENTURY	20th CENTURY
1. Slavery (1619–1863)	1. Segregation
2. Emancipation Proclamation	2. Supreme Court Decision of 1954
3. Reconstruction	3. Martin Luther King, Jr.
4. Rutherford B. Hayes	4. Richard Nixon
5. Plessy vs. Ferguson	5. Webber-Bakke Anti-Affirmative Action Cases

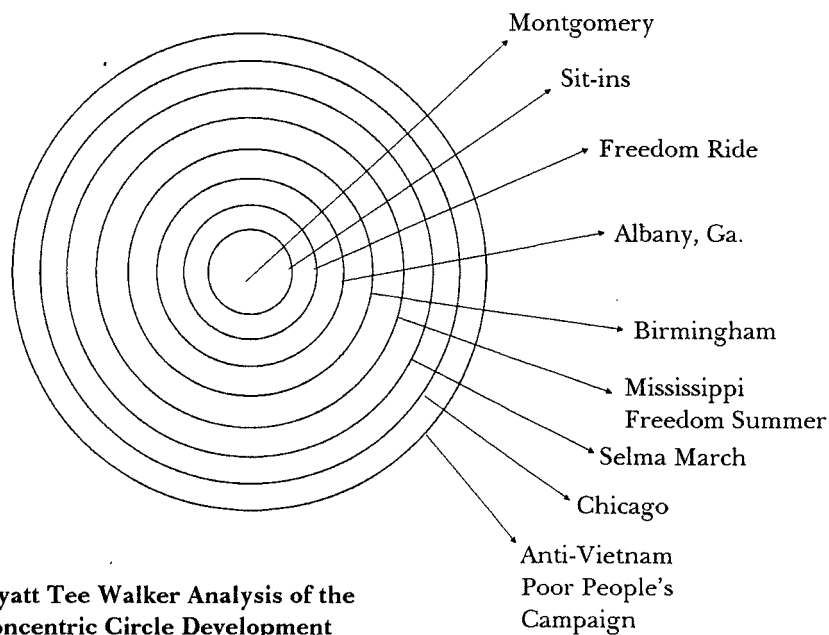
Let me underscore the legend of the chart with some brief comments on the items listed. The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate in graphic form, the cyclical character of American history as it relates to African-American life. The flow of history in each century reveals that after some identifiable gains, a regression takes place that nullifies the gains previously made.

Benchmarks of the Civil Rights Movement

Though the Civil Rights Movement is now dormant in public perception, the struggle against racism continues though not with the momentum and power it exhibited in the King era. The power of that movement and its historic lessons deserve some analysis at this juncture.

This second chart (see following page) is a representation of the development of the nonviolent movement in America and its primary way stations that had a profound impact on the sociology of America around the issue of race. In a previously published work that has now been released here in Japanese, for the sake of description, I have called it the Walker Analysis of the Concentric Circle Development of the Nonviolent Movement in the United States.

The Supreme Court Decision of 1954 held promise in the African-American psyche of righting the wrongs on race that had been so everlasting. The Court's inability to implement or lack of will transmitted the hoax to the heart of Black America. Martin Luther King, Jr., born of well-to-do parents, credentialed by Boston University, young, gifted and an African-American preacher, introduced the modern techniques of Mohandas K. Gandhi wrapped up in the religion and morality of the folk churches of Black America.



Wyatt Tee Walker Analysis of the Concentric Circle Development of the Nonviolent Movement in the U. S.

King's nonviolent program of attack against an old enemy (segregation) on a scale of mass involvement constructively channeled the bitter and frustrated energies of a people too often betrayed. Let me share with you the socio-historical analysis that is keyed to this second chart:

The foregoing analysis provides a broad sweep of the modern Civil Rights era in the U.S. and underscores an irony of fact. The King movement did involve more humanity, more ergs of energy, hundreds of thousands of dollars, countless court briefs and litigation and too many precious lives and limbs. However, with all the gains, visible and invisible, the changes have been more symbolic than substantive. Twenty years after the Supreme Court's landmark decision outlawing segregation in public education, anti-busing riots raged in Boston, an alleged bastion of liberality on race matters. The forces that always resisted full equality for African-Americans re-grouped and the adversary of racism became more formidable than ever. In the wake of the frenetic Civil Rights era, it was probable and predictable that a Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George Bush would rise to power and nullify the hard-fought gains of the principal victims of racism-African-American citizens!

Significance of the African-American Civil Rights Movement

A. THE RESISTANCE IS RELIGIOUS & MORAL

Given the painful sociology of African-Americans on the North American continent and the onslaught of racist practices even as I speak, one must wonder, *How have the victims of racism in the United States managed to survive?* The African-American struggle against pervasive and systemic racism has been nothing short of heroic. A lesser people might have succumbed long ago to some semblance of accommodation or lost hope altogether. That has not been the profile of African-American people in struggle. In the darkest days of slavery and throughout the disappointment and frustration of not having not yet come to justice and equality, the hopes and aspirations of Americans of African ancestry have never wavered. We have been sustained primarily by our religious faith expressed in the person of Jesus Christ. It has been the quality of our religious practice that has encouraged African-Americans that *a better day is coming*. Eugene Genovese, a Marxist historian at the University of Rochester, did a monumental study of the economics of slavery. he wondered as he pursued his ten year study, *By what means did Black people find the resiliency to survive so horrific an existence imposed by America slavery?* this Marxist historian concluded that it was the quality of the slave community's religious faith and practice that maintained their sense of humanity in such an inhumane slave system. In tribute to his conclusion and the antebellum slaves, he named his published work after a Negro Spiritual, *Roll, Jordan Roll!*

I do not mean to suggest that every single person of African ancestry is religious, although most are, formally and informally. I am submitting to you that there is no doubt in my mind that without the religious mooring common to African-American life, we could never have survived as a people with our fundamental humanity intact.

Of equal significance is the fact that the modern-day Civil Rights Movement of which much has been said in this place, issued directly from the African-American church arena. Any superficial or intense scrutiny of African-American history will disclose that all efforts of the race to achieve justice and liberty have moved singularly on the religious impulse of African-Americans. From slavery to the present, the resistance to racism has been mounted as a moral struggle against the evil it is. At the center of the resistance was the African-American Church

and its personnel from Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson in this modern era. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States that is the focus of our discussion produced some revolutionary changes in the sociology of America on the issue of race. Those changes followed in the wake of the nonviolent movement just recently described. What was the genesis of the movement? How was it financed? Who were its leaders? Where did it meet? Who were the troops? The answer one way or another, is the same—the African-American Church. Following in the tradition of its beginning and history, the African-American Church served as the headquarters of the movement that produced the most radical social change in the United States since the Civil War. Thus the primary significance of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. is that it is grounded in the religious faith and practice of those who are the chief victims of racism and oppression against which the movement struggled.

B. UNCOVERED U.S. RACISM

Another significant aspect of the Civil Rights Movement is that it has unmistakably established that the overarching social dilemma of the United States is that of race. Until the era of the Fifties and Sixties, the U.S. was widely perceived as the paragon of democracy in the West. The flowering of instantaneous news reporting and electronic news gathering paralleled the most powerful days of the Civil Rights Movement that provided any one with access to a television an accurate picture of where the U.S. really stood on race and color. no longer could the U.S. parade its alleged virtue of being *the land of the Free and the home of the brave*. The whole fabric of lily-white America began to crumble under the moral pressure of that movement that was augmented by the liberation struggles around the globe, particularly in the Third World. The shiny image of the U.S. on the world scene was tarnished by the revelations on racial issues uncovered by the Civil Rights Movement.

C. INTERNATIONAL IN IMPACT

The technology of television produced a spin-off. As news flashed around the world of dogs and fire hoses being used on children in Birmingham, Alabama and the brutality inflicted on nonviolent demonstrators in hundreds of cities across the South, the Civil Rights Movement became internationalized. The struggles for liberation in South

Africa, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique and to a lesser degree in Central America, began to identify with the struggles of African-Americans in the U.S. In most instances, the foreign policy of the United States aligned the nation with the enemies of most of the liberation struggles in the world. The most controversial linkage, of course, was the contact established between the Civil Rights Movement and the Palestine Liberation Organization. High profile African-American leaders such as Jesse Jackson of PUSH(People United to Serve Humanity), Joseph Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Walter Fauntroy, confidant of Martin Luther King, Dr. and a U.S. official, William A Jones of the National Black Pastors' Conference and your speaker embraced the morality of the Palestinian cause though not its methods. The struggle for self-determination and the return of their land in our view is precisely the same struggle of the African National Congress and that struggle against the racist regime of apartheid. It is safe to say that most African-Americans identify equally with both struggles. That support is the logical extension of our fundamental commitment to human rights. Thus the concerns and energy of the Civil Rights Movement have been internationalized. It is no accident that our national hymn of struggle, *We Shall Overcome* has been sung in Soweto, South Africa as well as in Northern Ireland. Its melodies have been lifted in the refugee camps of southern Lebanon and Syria. The telecast that reported the crumbling of the Soviet Union's eastern bloc of nations reported the singing of this hymn in Bucharest, Romania, Warsaw, Poland and Prague, Czechoslovakia. This is the clear evidence of the international impact of the African-American Civil Rights Movement.

D. ECONOMIC INJUSTICE REVEALED

There is some corollary significance to some specific issues raised by the activity of our movement. The early days of our struggle was focused on establishing white America's respect for our humanity. All forms of segregation and discrimination are de-humanizing. The blatant practice of racism in the Deep South with its *colored* entrances, *colored* drinking water fountains, *colored* seats on buses and trains, *colored* toilets-all were daily insults to our humanity. Once the system of segregation was dismantled, a deeper problem manifested itself. It was an empty victory to gain the right to sit at a lunch counter without adequate funds to purchase a meal. Our struggle against blatant racism uncovered the eco-

conomic injustice which contributed to keeping institutionalized racism in place. Employment discrimination impacts on housing and education. Something is immoral in a land where 20% of the people control 80% of the wealth. There are more than 30 million Americans who live below the poverty line in the United States, a disproportionate number of whom are African-American and Hispanic. In addition, *USA Today's* June 12th issue reported that there are another 25 million who are classified as the *working poor*. They go to work every day but the cost of living is such that they are failing economically. The projection is that they will soon join the ranks of the poor. That is the result of the economic injustice against which the remaining forces of the Civil Rights Movement struggles. Much of the economic injustice is induced by the United States preoccupation with military preparedness and military aid to conflicts that are of questionable morality (e.g. Jonas Savimbi's forces in Angola and the *Contras* in Nicaragua). The implements of war and their costliness drain the national treasury of billions of dollars that should be used for employment, housing, education, job training etc. It is apparent to those of us in the African-American community that no real diminution of racism will take place until there is a fairer distribution of the wealth in America. Racism and capitalism have been in bed together since the rise of the Atlantic slave trade. The African-American Civil Rights Movement has laid bare the economic injustice in the land.

E. STERILITY OF WESTERN RELIGION

The final area of significance of the African-American Civil Rights Movement is a clear commentary on Western religion. In the early section of this paper in my discussion of the slave era, I made a passing reference to the role of European Christians in the machinery of slavery. Not much has changed. Despite the claim and presumption that the United States is a Christian nation and Americans are viewed as religious, close examination will reveal that Western religion is one of the major players in the conspiracy of racism. The record of the religious forces in America on race is abysmal. The denominational families of colonial America split over the question of slavery. Christians in the South insisted on keeping their slaves on economic *and* theological grounds. As statutory segregation proceeded and captured the mores of the nation, the white Church was silent. During the glory days of our movement, precious little support came from white Christians and then only

when it was reasonable *safe* to do so. Racism is alive and well in America today and the churches and synagogues are silent and non-active. The African-America Civil Rights Movement without question uncovered the hypocrisy of Western religion.

I do not mean to suggest that the people of the religious community of the United States are not nice people. Some of them are very charming. however, charm seldom confronts or combats evil. There is one disclaimer that should be submitted. The religious community in America does not have any special bias on the issue of race. It has been consistently silent and absent on almost every justice issue. The religious community of white America is silent and non-active on war, hunger, economic justice, apartheid, etc. The silence and lack of participation on the race issue is glaring because the tenets of faith of all religions reject racism. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are unanimous in their condemnation of racism. If that is a given, and if the overarching dilemma of American society is racism, the silence and inactivity of the religious community in America renders their faith commitment suspect. Churches, synagogues and temples should lead and not follow.

Of course, there are exceptions and it would be grossly unfair of me not to note the exceptions. The National Council of Churches in recent years has been very vocal. However, there are many congregations in America who will have nothing to do with the Council simply because it does speak. It must be mentioned in the same breath, that statements alone will not suffice in the struggle against the beast of racism. Unfortunately, the base of support for the NCC is narrow at best and does not afford the Council the kind of resources and support for an aggressive social, economic and political war against the systemic racism of white America. To a lesser degree, there are other exceptions. Denominational commissions on *Race and Justice* or *Justice and Peace* which for the most part remain ineffective because they carry very little broad-based support in the denominations they represent. There is a lot of talk but little action.

If the devotees of religion in America who profess faith in God would really get busy on the issue of race, it wouldn't be very long before the problem could be solved. These same persons are in the media, they sit on bank boards, city councils, they are Congress persons, governors, judges, senators and one is President, but there is no fundamental com-

mitment in their God-relationship to fight racism. The African-American Civil Rights Movement is significant because it unmasked the charade of organized religion in the dominant Community of the United States. The reality is that the practice of religion in white America is sterile. It has neither the power nor the will to do anything about the establishment of justice and peace in the land.

It is my earnest hope that what I have shared with you in this paper is accurate and balanced. I can personally vouch for the history of the African-American Civil Rights movement. My wife and four children lived through it. I cannot tell you how many times our lives were at risk. Mrs. Walker and I have been jailed in the United States a total of seventeen times. We lost some of our best friends in that struggle chief among whom was that great spirit Martin Luther King, Jr. I trust your understanding and appreciation of the African-American Civil Rights Movement have been increased. *A luta continua* — the struggle continues!