

## **“Fierce Urgency” for the Rights of All Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Democratic Power**

**Remarks by Jack DuVall –San Fernando Valley Interfaith Council  
Los Angeles, California - January 15, 2007**

Five nights ago, the president of the United States announced that twenty thousand more American troops and perhaps two more years were needed to continue a war that he says is part of “the decisive ideological struggle of our time,” for freedom and democracy in the Middle East.

Forty years ago, in Riverside Church in New York City, the American whose birthday we celebrate today spoke of similar themes and another war. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “all over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression.” But he said that the war in Southeast Asia was not a way to assist that revolt, that America needed to engage in a “positive thrust for democracy” by taking “offensive action in behalf of justice.” And of course he spoke of America’s own nonviolent movement for rights -- which he had led -- as an example for the world.

Seven years before, Dr. King had sent the Rev. James Lawson, who now lives here in Los Angeles, to Nashville, Tennessee to open a new front in the struggle against the last great American domestic oppression, racial segregation. Jim Lawson organized students from black colleges to stage a rolling series of lunch-counter sit-ins and department store boycotts that destroyed the willingness of that city’s business community to defend segregation, dissolving the racial system of a city that had called itself “the Athens of the South.”

All across the South, more sit-ins and boycotts, civil disobedience and mass marches were staged in city after city, raising the cost of racial discrimination, awakening the conscience of Americans everywhere, pressuring the federal government to intervene to stop brutality against protesters, and plunging segregation into a terminal crisis – all without firing a single shot.

In his speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington three years later, Dr. King said that “the time to make real the promises of democracy” had come, that the “time to make justice a reality” had arrived – for everyone. If one citizen is deprived of rights, the rights of all are jeopardized. The nonviolent movement for the social and political liberation of African-Americans reinforced the rights of all Americans.

On his route to Washington from Illinois before his inauguration as president, Abraham Lincoln gave a talk to the New Jersey Senate. He spoke about the men who had fought with George Washington in the American Revolution. “I am exceedingly anxious that that thing which they struggled for,” he said, which “held out a great promise to all people of the world to all time to come – I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made.”

Thirty months into the Civil War, Lincoln restated that idea. He said that America was dedicated to a “proposition,” that all are “created equal.” And then he asked us to offer “increased devotion” to the cause for which those who died to save the Union had

given “the last full measure” of devotion: “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Today another president is asking that more Americans, some of whom may be here tonight, give the last full measure of devotion for that cause, in Iraq. But since Dr. King spoke at the Lincoln Memorial, history offers evidence that it is no longer necessary for men and women at arms to die, to create or restore government by the people.

When Jim Lawson’s students demonstrated at the Nashville city hall in 1960, a guitar player led protesters in singing a song that black women strikers had first used in South Carolina. It was called “We Shall Overcome.” In the following forty years, that song was sung by protesters at the height of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and in the movement against a dictator in Indonesia.

But the civil rights movement here gave more than a song to the ensuing cascade of nonviolent revolutions elsewhere. Thanks to its time and location, Dr. King’s movement won the first nonviolent victory reported by the modern mass media. The troops in Dr. King’s army made the world take notice that nonviolent force could be more powerful than violent coercion.

Thirteen years after Dr. King’s speech in Riverside Church, Polish workers sat down and refused to leave their shipyards until they won the right to a free trade union – which spelled the beginning of the end of communist rule. Six years later, Filipinos mounted a “people power” revolution and dislodged a dictator. Two years later, a nonviolent coalition of Chileans refused to allow Gen. Augusto Pinochet to stay for a third term. One year later, East Germans, Mongolians and others living under Soviet-dominated regimes choked their cities’ streets until rulers called new elections. Half a world away, black citizens boycotted South African businesses, went out on strike, and made that country ungovernable, until a new system of equal rights was established.

And in this century, corrupt and autocratic governments in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine have been overturned by nonviolent campaigns that refused to accept stolen elections. Today, there is vigorous nonviolent action underway against authoritarian rulers or military occupiers in Zimbabwe, West Papua, Western Sahara, Egypt, Iran, Tunisia, Tibet, and a score of other countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Dr. King had a phrase he would have used to describe all this. He spoke of the “marvelous new militancy” that had expedited the struggle for civil rights. But he knew that that cause required undaunted devotion. “I am not unmindful,” he told hundreds of thousands at the Lincoln Memorial, “that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulation...battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality.”

Last July I met a serene, articulate Iranian man who had been tortured for publishing words that his government did not like. A month later I met with a nonviolent democracy campaigner in the Maldivé Islands; she had been branded by her government as a terrorist and put under house arrest. Last fall, our Center sent alerts out to mobilize protests about the threatened torture of a leader of Women of Zimbabwe Arise, a nonviolent civic group in that country, who fortunately was released.

Those of us who rarely use creatively the political space that exists in this society would do well to realize that a struggle against injustice is not really represented by newspaper ads for impeaching the president or someone screaming in the back of a congressional hearing room. The struggle should summon what Dr. King called “fierce urgency.” It represents the decision, in the words of the great Czech dissident Václav Havel, of whether you are going to live the lie that life is normal, when you do not have your rights, or whether you are going to “live in the truth,” and open up what Havel called the “incalculable power” that can come from mass civic action.

In 50 of 67 transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy in the last 35 years, indigenous nonviolent force -- not military power or violent revolt -- was the pivotal factor. Nevertheless Americans invaded Iraq to remove a dictator and transform the Middle East. Violence was used to make political changes. Over 100,000 Iraqi civilians have died in that endeavor – equivalent to the population of Burbank or Santa Monica – and another 1.8 million have fled the country as refugees.

Must it always be that many have to flee or die to depose dictators and thwart terrorists, when other means exist to pursue the same ends? In speeches last week, the leaders of our government said that war-fighting should be “augmented” so that America can prevail in this ideological struggle, as if ideas could be promoted by shooting those who hate them.

In Alfonso Cuarón’s riveting new motion picture, “Children of Men,” a police state in Britain in the year 2027 is challenged by violent guerrillas who murder innocent people in pursuit of a woman they think will help discredit the regime, and tanks pulverize apartment buildings full of civilians while trying to kill guerrillas. From the action of either side, the result is not freedom but rubble.

Having invaded Iraq and opened the door to chaos, Americans cannot conscientiously abandon responsibility to restore order, if the means to do so will not escalate the suffering. But to assume that the cost of military action, however great, is justified, because the war must be intensified to wage a global struggle, ignores the reality that unlike civic force, the legitimacy of armed offensive action does not arise from the action or consent of its intended beneficiaries, the people. The justice of a cause cannot in fact be fully measured by the stated intentions of its proponents – it must also be judged by the manifest effect on those whose rights or whose lives are at issue. Wars are just if they defend life, not if they take it for the political purposes of those who start the wars. In light of fifty years of nonviolent liberation, a war for democracy that is not a war of self-defense is a contradiction in terms.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the lesson which American actions in Iraq seem to have taught the Middle East is best represented by the words of a member of the Iraqi parliament, who spoke on Al Jazeera on December 29. “Democracy can be established in our region only through force,” he said, “and only America can do it.” Is it any more surprising, then, that many say that if democracy does not prevail in Iraq, despite the will and force of a superpower, it cannot take root in the region? But that is true only if the people of the Middle East are somehow different from Indians, South Africans, Ukrainians, Filipinos, Salvadorans, African-Americans and every other people who have established or redeemed democracy through their own civic resistance. We should not extol democracy with our words while making people believe through our action that they cannot achieve it by themselves.

Marcus Garvey, an early voice of black liberation, told his followers: "Up you mighty race. You can be what you will, but you must do it." That is also what Mohandas Gandhi told his fellow Indians in their struggle for independence from the British Empire. Self-rule, he said, had to start with self-organization. Enjoining that, he made the means of conflict consistent with the ends he sought. Government by the people is achieved by movements of the people. And they have to be nonviolent, for that's the only way they can rally a majority and thus claim truthfully to represent the people. The quest for democracy in the Middle East is not properly an American project. It belongs to the people of the Middle East.

But what does belong to us is the work of teaching how democracy is really won. In his magnificent Jefferson Lecture at the National Endowment for the Humanities six years ago, Princeton historian James McPherson reminded us that Abraham Lincoln believed that the Civil War which saved American democracy "involved not only 'the fate of these United States' but also 'the whole family of man.'" It was a struggle 'not altogether for today' but 'for a vast future also'" -- which Dr. King, a proud and willing heir of Lincoln, instinctively saw. It was why King demanded we engage in a "positive thrust" for democracy throughout the world.

King also said "it would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment" in the fight for freedom. The question is how that fight should be conducted. Forty-three years after Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke under the gaze of Lincoln's statue, there is a robust strategic model for the nonviolent production of democratic power which is now universally accessible and directly competitive with the older model of violent coercion performed by insurrections, terrorism or invasions.

Osama bin Laden says that "oppression...cannot be demolished except in a hail of bullets." Lenin went further, saying that "real, nationwide terror" was needed to "reinvigorate" a country. But those who've emulated those two figures have only fostered fear, carnage and tyranny. Dr. King said that the "whirlwind of revolt" would not stop until the "security of justice" had been attained. But he taught Americans another way to reach that goal, and we must teach it now to the people of a new century.

If we would defend America from terrorists by reducing their appeal to people who refuse to live any longer in humiliation, and if we wish to see the day when democratic victory is universal, then the ideas of Lincoln, the strategies of Gandhi, and the practices of King must be taught wherever violence is still accepted as the only way to power.

Since I am speaking in a church, about a man who was a minister, I feel authorized to close with a few lines of scripture. In the Psalms, David speaks often about the people. "He saved them for his name's sake," David said, "that he might make his mighty power to be known." Isaiah went further: "He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might he increaseth strength." And Matthew said that when Christ called his disciples, "he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out."

Reading all these lines so many times, how could Dr. King not have been led to see that people have the power to free themselves? His life was the project of showing forth that truth, and his lesson in this century is that violence as a tool of power is not the better way to reach the promised land of freedom.