

DR. BERNICE POWELL JACKSON
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries

Take Back America Conference
Campaign for America's Future / Institute for America's Future

Plenary Session: Security in a Changed World

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I thank you for inviting a member of the faith community to be a part of this gathering, because faith, and values based on faith, must be an essential part of this conversation. It is out of the context of my faith that I can say that I believe that our nation has lost its moral center, its moral compass, and that without that, we will not thrive. Indeed, we may not survive.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his very last Sunday sermon, given only a few miles from this place at the Washington National Cathedral, said, "On some positions, cowardice asks the question, is it expedient? And then expedience comes along and asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? Conscience asks the question, is it right?"

I believe that the world is at a turning point, and that the United States, in particular, must take a critical look at itself and its actions, and, quite frankly, I do not see any evidence that we are willing to do so. Too many Americans are not asking Dr. King's question, is it right?

Is it right to attack Iraq?

Is it right to attack Iraq and not North Korea? Is it right to not only turn a deaf ear to our allies and to the United Nations because they don't agree with us, but also in the process to try to discredit and demean and devalue them just to win political points with the American people?

Is it right that in the weeks before the war, our government tried to use its economic and political and military clout to force nations in Latin America and the Caribbean and Canada and Mexico and Europe to support our war in the United Nations?

Or is it right for us to use the little island of Vieques as a live bombing target, and now that the Navy has left, to just close our base, ending all those jobs while not providing the hundreds of millions of dollars it would cost to clean up the devastation that we have caused?

Is it right to forget the people of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands, whose islands we destroyed with our atomic testing and whose health we have devastated?

Is it right to almost unconditionally support the government of Israel, while not requiring them to end their illegal occupation of Palestinian lands? Is it right to require Palestinians to elect new leadership, while not requiring Saudi Arabia to have elections at all?

Is it right to send millions of dollars of American taxpayers' money to support the military regime of Columbia under the rubric of ending the drug trade, when we know that much of that money will be diverted to paramilitaries and used against innocent peasants in that war-torn nation?

Is it right that many Nigerians - one of the world's largest suppliers of oil - cannot afford gas for their own cars or oil to light their own homes?

Is it right that millions of Africans are still dying each year from AIDS, when the drugs which can prolong their lives are available on the world market? Indeed, is it right that the whole continent of Africa is facing, not only AIDS and government corruption, but also starvation and civil wars in the Sudan and Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Sierra Leone and Angola, and using arms that our manufacturers have sold them, and we remain silent? Is that right?

Is it right that 1.2 billion human beings live on less than a dollar a day, while we in the United States live on \$77? In the words of Dr. King, conscience asks, is it right?

The great American playwright, August Wilson, has a new play called, *The Gem of the Ocean*. The main character in it is a 285-year old black woman, who says to those living with her, who are concerned about how did a young man who was desperate to talk with her get into the house after they had barred his way through the door. She said to them, "You've got to ask the right question if you want the right answer." She said, "The question is not, did he get in through the window in the hall. The question is, who left the window open?"

The right question is not, did Saddam Hussein have weapons of mass destruction. The right question is, how did he get them? Who did he get them from? The right question is, whose helicopters delivered the poison gas, which he sprayed on the Kurds? The right question is, who supported him as he was ascending into power? And, oh yes, there is also the little question of, if he had such weapons, where did they go? And the questions of, if we could protect Iraqi oils wells, why couldn't we protect the nuclear power plant which the people looted, and why couldn't we protect the national museum with the antiquities important for all of humankind?

Dr. King, in his last year, often said that the war in Vietnam was but a symbol of a far deeper malady within the American spirit. He pointed out that a sensitive American

diplomat once said to him that it seemed that the United States was on the wrong side of a world revolution.

Indeed, as I have looked over history since World War II, the U.S. has almost always been on the wrong side of a revolution. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh first came to the Americans for help, but we turned him away. In Ghana we overthrew Nkrumah, a great African leader. In Chile, we overthrew Allende. In South Africa, we sided with the Afrikaans. In Kenya, we sided with the British. In Haiti, we sided with Duvalier. In Panama, we supported Noriega. In Cuba, we supported Batista. In the Congo, we supported Mobutu. In Iran, we propped up the Shah. In the Philippines, we supported Marcos. In Indonesia, we supported Sukarno. In Nicaragua, we fought the Sandinistas. In El Salvador, we sided with the military and the paramilitary. In Columbia, we sided with the military and paramilitaries. In Israel and Palestine, we side with Israelis, and ignore the plight of the Palestinians.

The basis for our always choosing the wrong side has been that we have chosen sides for the wrong reasons. In many cases, we chose sides based on the Cold War chess game. In other cases, we chose sides based on leaders that we thought we could manipulate, and turned a blind eye to their corruption and misuse of funds and oppression of their own people. Now we want the people of those nations to pay back the debts of those corrupt leaders who we helped to keep in power. That is bad foreign policy, and bad moral policy as well.

In the process of all this, I believe that the United States has forgotten our own principles of democracy and freedom, and done little to engender them in other parts of the world. Too often, we have equated capitalism with democracy, and in the process we have lost our soul. How could we support South Africa? Because of its gold and its diamonds and its minerals. How could we support Duvalier? Because we wanted his silence. How can we continue to support nations of the Middle East, when there is no democracy, and where the majority of the people are oppressed and poor? Because we want their oil. Or today, how can we cite the many UN violations of Iraq as a cause for war, without acknowledging our own violations?

What I believe we must have, as we work for peace and justice in the 21st Century, is this. We, in the north, must be willing to accept our part of the responsibility for what is wrong with the world - for global warming and destruction of the environment. We must take responsibility, as Archbishop Oscar Romero said, for those who are made poor, who are made poor by our economic systems and injustices. We must take responsibility for our systems of racism and colonialism.

Secondly, we must commit ourselves to building a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-generational, multi-national, multi-gendered, multi sexually-oriented, multi-abled coalition - with a rainbow of people in the leadership, as well as the followship. We've got to put aside our egos. We've got to put aside our past betrayals, our past stereotypes. We've got to put aside fears of each other, and understand that what we

are fighting are the powers in the principalities. And they will use anything they can use to divide us and to conquer us.

Finally, we've got to commit ourselves for the long-distance race because, truly, this will be one. In the 1960s, those of us in the African-American community were mostly interested in working on racial justice. And in the 1970s, those in the peace community were mostly interested in working for an end to the war. We've got to understand that racial justice and economic justice and peace are interconnected. People of color have got to do the anti-war work. And Anglo-Americans have got to do the justice work. And we've got to involve our young people. As I read the *New York Times* last week, and saw the profiles of conservative college students across this nation, I know that we've got to reach out with great intentionality to our young people. As I see articles about young women who don't believe in a woman's right of choice, I know that we've got to reach out to our young people.

Friends, we've got to take back America. Just like those of us who are Christians have got to take back our faith, those of us who are patriots must take back our nation. When it comes to foreign policy, we've got to ask the right questions, as that old lady said. And then we've got to ask, is it right, in the words of Dr. King. Thank you.