

*Essays***“Don't Let This Harvest Pass” The Present Moment in Brazil, the Americas and the World**

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When the European slave ships left Africa hundreds of years ago with our ancestors in chains, many ships landed in Brazil, while others disgorged their human cargo in the United States. As descendants of these enslaved Africans, we are citizens of different nations, speak different languages and embrace different cultures, but we are and always will be “kinfolks.” In the United States, any drop of Black blood or descent, makes a person, irrespective of color or appearance, an “African American.” Whether our skin is light or dark, African Americans and Afro descendants in Brazil are members of an extended family. We are bound together by our shared and continuous struggle against second-class citizenship and the insistence that our rights, our human rights, be respected. We are bound together by shared interests. And we are bound together by bonds of affection and respect.

Our people—in Brazil and in the United States—have come a very long way. At the beginning of the last century, Black Americans had just escaped the bonds of slavery and were being lynched and intimidated. We were forced to live in racially segregated and isolated neighborhoods, educated in separate and unequal schools from Whites, denied equal access to public accommodations and facilities, and forced to labor in the lowest and meanest occupations. Racial discrimination was legal, and we bore the brunt of its cruel effects.

Today, one third of African Americans are members of the middle class; one third are members of the working poor; and one third are still desperately poor. We have much work ahead of us. The price paid for our advancement has been high. But as a group, we have more resources and more access to opportunity than ever before. And we have gained some means by which to help each other.

Much of the African American struggle has been to gain the right to vote—to elect candidates of our choice. For many years, African Americans were forcibly barred from voting in many parts of the United States. It was only in 1965 that racial discrimination in voting rights was prohibited by federal law. Dr. Martin Luther King once observed that during the civil rights era and aftermath, African Americans expended more energy and effort to secure the right to vote than anything else. Why? Because African Americans knew that gaining access to public power, public office and public resources was the most important means by which to effect change and improve our plight. Once we got the right to vote, mounted campaigns to educate our people about the policy issues and choices to be made, and marshaled our collective voting strength, we could not be ignored!

* Adapted from remarks given in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, July 26, 2001. At the time of the address, Huntley was SEF's president-elect

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I first came to Brazil in the early 1980s. Since that time, I have seen remarkable changes occurring here. Only a few short years ago, a military government was in place. There was no serious commitment to democratic values and practices, and the myth of the “great racial democracy” was intact. Only a few short years ago, there were few Afro descendants who affirmed their links to the African Diaspora or acknowledged that race and color are factors that have historically contributed to their disproportionate impoverishment and continue to fuel inequality today. Only a few years ago, the presence of Afro Brazilians as part of the global struggle for human rights was largely invisible. Dare I say that only a few years ago a meeting of this scale and quality would not have been possible?

In the modern world in which we live, the premium is now put on having well fed, well educated, healthy people who can operate in a complex technology-driven global economic order. Those nations that have highly educated and skilled workforces have the competitive edge.

Today, the government of Brazil has for the first time in its history faced up to the presence of race and appearance based barriers to opportunity. It has acknowledged that gross inequality is against the best interest of the nation and contrary to international human rights instruments and domestic law. It has promulgated a few policies to test out how to reach and better meet the needs of your nation’s poorest of the poor, Afro Brazilians. This is welcome, but not enough.

A world community watches Brazil today to see whether it will make real on its promise to defend and protect people of African descent, invest in their education and wellbeing, and importantly focus in direct ways at dismantling institutional arrangements, practices and policies that privilege a small minority of Brazil’s people but disserve the interests of most of its people. The global community is aware that in Brazil poverty has an overwhelmingly Black and Brown face. And there is also growing support in the world community for the efforts of many fine public servants and private individuals and institutions that are seeking to chart a new course for your nation, a course that moves away from exclusion and racism and toward inclusion and respect for shared humanity.

There was a time in both of our countries and others around the world, when the economy was based on agrarian production or other forms of manufacturing. It may have been in the economic interests of some people to have large masses of poor people to exploit for cheap labor. But today, all of that is changing. In the modern world in which we live, the premium is now put on having well fed, well-educated, healthy people who can operate in a complex technology-driven global economic order. Those nations that have highly educated and skilled workforces have the competitive edge.

Neither Brazil, nor United States can live up to the full measure of their promise as long as they are home to millions of poor Black and Brown people living on the margins of society. Global businesses don’t want to locate

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in places where health is poor, crime is high, educational systems are failing, and indifference to human suffering is the hallmark. Investment capital does not flow well or long to places where workers are poorly trained, where the consumer base is small, where little children are shoeless and malnourished, and where impunity is a way of life for the privileged.

Thus investing in the education, health, and training of Black people in our nations is not simply a matter of fairness. It is not simply a matter of law enforcement. When we press for services for our people, for responses to their needs, for concrete programs and policies to narrow color-coded disparities in well being, we are acting in the highest interests of our countries because investing in our communities is a major way to help all of the people in our nations thrive. When we press for services for our people, we are trying to help our nations can grow and compete effectively in the emerging global economy. Helping our people is in the national economic, social and political interest of each of our nations.

In the present moment in which we find ourselves, much is at stake. What we need, in the United States, in Brazil and elsewhere around the world is people who are honest, determined to be free, willing to work hard and without compromise to change the status quo, and absolutely committed to service to the community and accountability. We must hold ourselves accountable to the highest standards of leadership, integrity and preparation, and we must work to hold others who may not be sympathetic to the needs of our people equally accountable. If we fail in these two tasks, we fail our people and ourselves.

There is an old Black American spiritual that used to be sung by the enslaved which goes like this: “Brother please, don’t let this harvest pass.” What our forebears were saying to us, I think is this: We have worked hard to come to the present moment. We have watered the fields with our tears and plowed the furrows through backbreaking labor. We have planted the seeds of hope, determination, character and endurance. Now, it is your turn. Don’t let this harvest pass.