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Days of Darkness in America, Sparks of Hope

By Devon DB

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Currently in the United States, we live in an extremely polarized political sphere. People not only seek out news and op-eds that reinforce their own viewpoints, but also associate mainly with those who align with them politically in order to collectively and viciously demonize ‘the other side.’ The situation has gotten to the point where people view the policies of the opposing party as a threat to the nation. Globally, it seems that the landscape is even worse with problems arising in the Ukraine, the West once again embroiled in a war in the Middle East, and the knowledge that we’ve already seen irreversible damage due to climate change and are getting ever-closer to the 2017 deadline where climate change will truly be permanent. These are dark days; however, there is room for optimism. Around the world, we have seen unlikely political alliances that are working to fight for a better future.

The ‘Cowboy-Indian Alliance’

The ‘Cowboy-Indian Alliance’ made waves back in April 2014 when they led a five-day ‘Reject and Protect’ campaign in Washington D.C. against the proposed Keystone XL pipeline. The action was quite prominent, although the origins of the alliance haven’t fully been brought to light, nor has the historical importance of such an alliance.

Art Tanderup, a Nebraska farmer who has actively protested against Keystone XL, stated in an April 2014 interview that the alliance formed years ago due to the “common interests between farmers, ranchers and Native Americans in northern Nebraska and southern South Dakota. We’ve come together as brothers and sisters to fight this Keystone XL pipeline, because of the risk to the Ogallala Aquifer, to the land, to the health of the people.”

The pipeline is a common threat to both communities, as the Ogallala Aquifer, a water tablet located beneath the Great Plains, provides water for 2.3 million people. The pipeline also “threatens the Missouri River, which provides drinking water for probably a couple ‘nother million,” bringing the grand total to about five million people whose clean water supply is under threat due to the proposed construction. In addition, the aquifer also provides water for animals, livestock, and irrigation. All of this means that the pipeline threatens the health and economic stability of the Midwest.

For the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and the Great Sioux Nation, there is historical significance as well. Tanderup stated in the interview that part of the pipeline’s route, as well as part of his farm, “is on the Ponca Trail of Tears from back in the 1870s, where Chief Standing Bear and his people were driven from the Niobrara area to Oklahoma.”

The extraction processes, such as tar sands mining and the refining and dilution processes, used to obtain the oil are extremely dangerous. Gary Dorr noted in the same interview that, before the oil extraction started, Fort Chip in Canada had “a negligible cancer rate” and now “[has] a cancer rate 400 times the national Canadian per capita average” and that “every single family [in Fort Chip] has cancer in their families.”

The alliance, while appearing unlikely on the surface, is rooted in history. It actually isn’t new, but is rather “a later incarnation of an alliance that was first formed in 1987 to prevent a Honeywell weapons testing range in the Black Hills, one of the most sacred sites in Lakota cosmology – where, in the 1970s, alliances successfully fended off coal and uranium mining.” This current movement is the continuation of a fight for the environment that protects people rather than profits.

This is also affecting Native American-White relations. Take the story of Mekasi Horinek, a member of the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma who is a Native rights and environmental activist.

When first hearing of the Cowboy-Indian Alliance, he was rather skeptical, saying “I’ve always been a little bit bitter toward white society” and “I’ve experienced a lot of racism-growing up on the res, living on the res. When I went to town, I was always treated differently than others.” However, with a little convincing from his mother, he eventually joined, realizing the cowboys “have that love and respect for the land the same that we do.”

This alliance is having far-reaching effects that go beyond just an environmental coalition. It “is beginning the dialogue not just about broken treaties, but about the long history of colonization, the effects of which are ongoing among some of the United States’ poorest populations.” This can be shown by the fact that both sides “hope the pipeline, which has caused them both much distress, will be a catalyst for reconciliation,” and that they “sense the reconciliation their work is

a part of has a historic importance, something healing for both settlers and natives-and both feel that it is, in some way, destined to happen.”

Does this mean that everything will be smooth sailing between Native Americans and the descendants of settlers from here on out? Not in the slightest. However, it does offer some hope that a sort of reconciliation and reckoning will take place, changing the views of many so that they will aid the Native Americans in their fight for equal rights, as well as undo the damage done by over a century of mistreatment and cultural destruction.

Fighting For Peace in Palestine

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been ongoing since 1948, with both groups claiming the same land, and there is currently no end in sight. While the media promotes the narrative that both Palestinians and Israelis hate each other, there has been a large amount of support for the Palestinian cause as of late from Israelis and Jews.

For example, the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network took an ad out in the New York Times, which was “signed by 40 Holocaust survivors and 287 descendants and other relatives” and “[called] for the blockade of Gaza to be lifted and Israel to be boycotted.” More specifically, the ad stated that they were “alarmed by the extreme, racist dehumanization of Palestinians in Israeli society, which has reached a fever-pitch. In Israel, politicians and pundits in The Times of Israel and The Jerusalem Post have called openly for genocide of Palestinians and right-wing Israelis are adopting Neo-Nazi insignia.” The ad concluded by arguing for collective action, reading: “We must raise our collective voices and use our collective power to bring about an end to all forms of racism, including the ongoing genocide of Palestinian people.”

Actions such as these are greatly important as they prove that not all Jewish people support the Israeli war machine and the wanton slaughter of innocent Palestinians.

There were also solidarity actions in Israel itself. However, it seems that it is increasingly dangerous to be anti-war in Israel as there have not only been attacks by right-wing nationalists, but the Israeli government itself cracked down on anti-war demonstrations. It even went so far as to attempt to use the IDF to ban anti-war protests, proclaiming that the police must obey IDF Home Front Command orders. These orders “[do] not permit large gatherings in public during times of conflict,” which results in people being unable to protest.

There is also increasing support for an end to the conflict in Palestine as well. In June, it was noted that most Palestinians wanted a unity government and a narrow majority favored “peace talks and peaceful coexistence with Israel.” An August 2014 poll in Gaza revealed that a majority supported a long-term truce with Israel, even as they opposed the disarmament of the strip.

While the fight for an end to the conflict and the creation of a fully sovereign Palestinian state will continue to be a long and arduous one, it is still good to know that people support peace and are able to reach across lines to form solidarity movements.

Solidarity of the Suppressed

Around the world, minority communities are subject to unjust persecution in many societies – persecution which can range from discrimination and a lack or nonexistence of a political voice to outright brutalization and murder by security forces and intense repression. While oppressed groups have fought for their rights individually, rarely have we seen such groups show solidarity with one another and provide support for each other. With help from social media, this seems to be changing.

Black-Palestinian Solidarity

An inspiring alliance has formed between Black people in the US and Palestinians in Gaza, each of whom have shown solidarity with one another in their struggles.

To make the situation much more relatable for African-Americans, in May 2014, Kristian Davis Bailey penned the article *Why Black People Must Stand With Palestine* in which he noted that police brutality faced by Blacks and other minorities is directly related to the violence in Palestine as “Since 2001, thousands of top police officials from cities across the US have gone to Israel for training alongside its military or have participated in joint exercises here.” Both communities experience systemic mass incarceration as well: “Forty percent of Palestinian men have been arrested and detained by Israel at some point in their lives. (To put this in perspective, the 2008 figure for Blacks was 1 in 11.) Israel maintains policies of detaining and interrogating Palestinian children that bear resemblance to the stop and frisk policy and disproportionate raids and arrests many of our youth face.” The problems of Black people in the US and Palestinians in Gaza are intimately related as the security forces of both countries work together to develop tactics to oppress and brutalize our communities.

In 2012, Jemima Pierre of Black Agenda Report took a historical look of the situation that is still relevant today, noting that many black leaders spoke out in support of the Palestinian cause. Specifically she made mention that

“Palestine was an important issue during the Black Power years as radicals identified with and embraced the anti-colonial struggle against Israel. Huey Newton, even under allegations of anti-Semitism, stated, “...we are not against the Jewish people. We are against that government that will persecute the Palestinian people...The Palestinian people are living in hovels, they don’t have any land, they’ve been stripped and murdered; and we cannot support that for any reason.”

Alice Walker made the direct connection of the Palestinian plight to the Black experience: “Going through Israeli checkpoints is like going back in time to the American Civil Rights struggle.” By supporting the Palestinian people, Black people today are only continuing the pro-human rights legacy that has been set by many black leaders before them.

Palestinians have reciprocated in the form of supporting the people of Ferguson in their protests against the police. Al Jazeera reported that “Local authorities in Ferguson have begun responding to nightly protests with tear gas and rubber bullets. Palestinians on Twitter could relate, and shared words and images of support with the US protesters.”

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine issued a statement of support with Black people, saying that the organization “salutes and stands firmly with the ongoing struggle of Black people and all oppressed communities in the United States” and quoted Khaled Barakat, a Palestinian writer and activist, as saying the fight against US brutality around the world is linked, and that, “When we see the images today in Ferguson, we see another emerging Intifada in the long line of Intifada and struggle that has been carried out by Black people in the US and internationally.”

Solidarity between Palestinians and Blacks is important and noteworthy as it shows international solidarity against oppressive social structures and governments as well as forms a space where the two groups can discuss and interact with one another, from promoting awareness about each other’s plights to exchanging resistance tactics.

Black-Asian Solidarity

The National Council of Asian Pacific Americans issued a statement of solidarity with Ferguson, saying, in part that, “our own communities’ histories in the United States include violence and targeting, often by law enforcement.” While a statement may not seem like much, it is rather important as it notes the history of white supremacy and how that ideology is an enemy of all non-whites, no matter their actual skin color.

Soya Jung argued that what is going on in Ferguson mattered to Asian Americans as while Asians “do not move through the world in the crosshairs of a policing system that has its roots in slave patrols, or in a nation that has used me as an ‘object of fear’ to justify state repression and public disinvestment from the infrastructure on which my community relies,” the situation is still important due, firstly, to *han*.

Jung explains *han* as a word in Korean culture that “loosely means ‘the sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression’ that has been “expressed in protests against Japanese colonial rule in 1919, in the struggle for self-determination as the Korean war broke out in 1950, during student protests against the oppressive U.S.-backed South Korean government in 1960, and again during the democratic uprising in Kwangju in 1980.” This anger against a racist system of oppression and its importance to Jung’s identity is partly what connects the histories of Black and Asian America.

She then notes that Black rage “serves as a beacon when faced with the racial quandary that Asian Americans must navigate” with regards to “the invisibility of Asian death and the denial of any form of Asian American identity that doesn’t play by the model minority rulebook.”

Jaya Sundaresh took a broader view of the subject, in part discussing anti-blackness in the Asian community, writing that South Asian Americans must “work towards change in our own communities so that we do not inadvertently work to reinforce anti-black racism in this country, which is at the root of the police brutality which murdered Michael Brown.” She urged others to talk with their “South Asian friends and families about Ferguson, why it is important that we stop perpetuating or staying silent on racist views in our communities, why we should vocally support those in the African-American community who are working towards change, and why

we should stop keeping silent when our white friends and colleagues find ways to justify Darren Wilson's murder of Michael Brown."

The solidarity between Blacks and Asians serves as an important avenue to hash out problems and tensions that exist between the communities, with hopes of eliminating those tensions and working together to strike back against racist oppression.

Conclusion

Do all of these solidarity actions and statements mean that things are now okay? That Native Americans and settlers will get along, that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will end anytime soon, or that institutionalized and internalized racism will be dismantled? Unfortunately not. However, what these alliances do represent are sparks of hope that suggest we, as people, can put aside superficial differences and come together in an attempt to radically change the situation we currently find ourselves in.

These alliances, whether they are in the form of solidarity statements or marches, articles or tweets, should give people courage and nourishment to continue the fight for freedom and equality.

The world constantly seems like it is going to hell, and many feel that they may give up at any moment, but, to quote Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, "do not go gentle into that good night" instead one must "rage, rage against the dying light."

The light is almost dead and the clock has nearly struck midnight, but this is the chance for everyone to give it their very best. If we are going to go down, let's go down swinging. Let's give 'em hell!