

## On “Operational Unity”

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Afro centrist Maulana Karenga likes to claim that he created the concept of operational unity in which Black people could come together despite their differences. In truth, however, Malcolm X promoted this idea at least as early as 1963 in his classic “Message to the Grassroots.”

Malcolm said that Black people should put aside their “petty differences” and unite on the basis of a common enemy, the White oppressor. The main problem with Malcolm’s call is that many of the differences among Black people – or any other people – are not so petty. On the contrary, those differences could be downright insurmountable.

Years after Malcolm’s call, Kwame Ture, previously known as Stokely Carmichael, wisely observed that you do not unite on the basis of a common *enemy*. Rather, you unite on the basis of common objectives and a common destiny.

Indeed, it could be very problematic – even dangerous – to unite on the basis of a common enemy. Just because different groups share an enemy does not mean those groups have the same goals.

For example, progressive African American groups want freedom and justice for all. Reactionary African Americans, however, want to go in a different direction. Reactionary Black Nationalists are best exemplified by the Nation of Islam (NOI.)

The NOI preaches female submission and promotes homophobia. They embrace pseudoscience and bigoted paranoid conspiracy theories. They have literally demonized White people, especially White Jews. They have defended the enslavement of Black people in Sudan and embraced anti-democratic African dictators such as Robert Mugabe, Sani Abacha and Mobutu Sese Seko.

One of the best examples of operational unity among African Americans occurred when the NOI’s leader Minister Louis Farrakhan called for the Million Man March (MMM.) African Americans from all over the nation came out in full force to attend the gathering. Later, there were other marches called by Farrakhan such as the Million Family March.

One might ask, what is the big deal about joining forces (with an ultra-reactionary demagogue)? The problem is that these kinds of events give attention, respectability and support to reactionary leadership. Especially if the reactionary leader is charismatic, his or her program becomes increasingly attractive to the masses. Thus, reactionary leaders present attractive alternatives and serious challenges to progressive programs and leadership. Yet many people are under the impression that operational unity is an end in itself. The bottom line, however, is that if operational unity ultimately threatens progressive action by promoting reactionary leadership, operational unity becomes a *liability*. Furthermore, unity with reactionary leadership squanders the moral authority that progressives worked so hard to achieve. (No one understood this better than Martin Luther King, who consistently steered clear of Reactionary Black Nationalists.)

Black women have often come out on the bottom of calls for operational unity from both Black men and White women. Black feminists have rightly complained that Black men have expected them to sacrifice their interests in the name of Black unity under Black male leadership. (Many Black males and defenders of patriarchal thinking have maintained that feminism is a threat to Black unity.) Moreover, Black feminists have complained that White feminists have expected them to unite under programs in which Black women's interests were not adequately addressed.

Operational unity invariably creates strange bedfellows. Among the strangest have been feminists and patriarchal religionists that oppose pornography and prostitution. Both groups oppose porn and prostitution for different reasons, and the sides are critical of each other. Yet they have united on the basis of a common "enemy." Each raises the profile (and possibly the influence and the power) of the other by working together. Yet patriarchal religion continues to be a great threat to women's liberation.

Some people claim that "desperate times require desperate measures?" But when are times truly desperate? Times might be truly desperate when a nation is under military attack. At such time, it is perfectly understandable that the citizens of the nation would pull together for survival. However, when progressives pull together with reactionary forces when times are merely challenging, all hell could break loose.

Progressives should push for more unity among themselves and with moderates and even conservatives. However, all of these groups should as far as possible isolate dangerous, reactionary, authoritarian leaders. They should show the world that they are consistently principled, as was Martin Luther King. They should establish unquestionable moral authority and never squander it due to feelings of frustration or desperation. Reactionary demagogues are always looking for an opportunity to make their move. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the modern world of politics. Operational unity must not make room for rogues and riffraff that will ultimately only undermine any serious efforts to bring about freedom, justice and equality for all.