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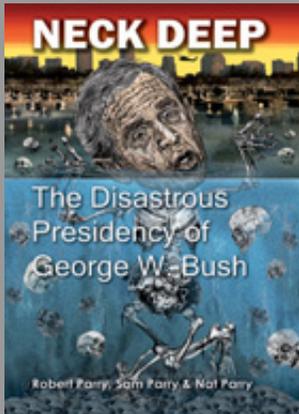
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Age of Obama

Barack Obama's

A Ripple of Hope from the Past

By Lisa Pease
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Editor's Note: The first year of Barack Obama's presidency has been shaped by pressure from Washington's political/media establishment to continue many of George W. Bush's foreign and domestic policies – and by Obama's own caution in making significant changes.

In this New Year's essay, Lisa Pease suggests that Obama stop reacting to the fulminations of Dick Cheney and instead lend an ear to the wise counsel of Robert F. Kennedy:

Former Vice President Dick Cheney has decried President Barack Obama for not taking a more belligerent tone against terrorism, accusing him of making Americans less safe when he "pretends we aren't at war with terrorists." But Obama is not Dick Cheney, and thank goodness.

I think Obama understands that words of war do not inspire fear in the enemy. They often simply create *new* enemies.

I hope Obama instead heeds the lesson of these words, said by Robert Kennedy in South Africa some 43 years ago:

"Everywhere, new technology and communications bring men and nations closer together, the concerns of one inevitably becoming the concerns of all. And our new closeness is stripping away the false masks, the illusion of difference which is at the root of injustice and hate and war.

"Only earthbound man still clings to the dark and poisoning superstition that his world is bounded by the nearest hill, his universe ended at river shore, his common humanity enclosed in the tight circle of those who share his town and views and the color of his skin.

"It is your job, the task of the young people of this world, to strip the last remnants of that ancient, cruel belief from the civilization of man."

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International

From free trade to the

Today, the "cause" is "anti-terrorism." Yesterday, it was "anti-communism." And always, despite the overt rhetoric, the covert goal has always been resources. Oil in Iran and farmland in Guatemala in the 1950s. Minerals in Cuba, Indonesia and Congo in the 1960s. Oil in Iraq and Somalia. Perhaps a pipeline through Afghanistan.

But there is another path, and Robert Kennedy expressed it in South Africa in 1966.

"Is this all that we believe in? Anti-communism? Is that all that we stand for in our own countries and our own hearts?"

RFK continued: "Is that all that we're fighting in Vietnam about? Is that what we're helping and assisting other countries around the globe about - because we don't want them to be taken over by communism - that is our only philosophy? Anti-communism?"

"I think we stand for *something*. I think we stand for something positive." He then asserted what that positive was:

"What is it that we stand for? We stand for human freedom. We stand for human dignity. We stand for ending discrimination, and ending hunger."

He expressed what his close associate and frequent speechwriter Adam Walinsky said was a "constant refrain" in his life: "... we stand for extending the cause of freedom and justice all over the globe. That's why I think we've attracted other people - those who've had a difficult time in their own lives - to come and follow the banner of the United States, not just because we're anti-communists, but because we stand for something."

Is Anti-Terrorism Enough?

As Walinsky noted in a new documentary, this theme will continue to come up "constantly now as we deal with the question of terrorism." Are we going to stand only for anti-terrorism, or for something greater?

I recently stumbled across this remarkable documentary in the course of my research on the life and death of Robert Kennedy. Hunter College professors Larry Shore, a former South African resident, and Tami Gold, an award-winning documentarian, have put together a film on one of the most remarkable events from Robert Kennedy's life, his visit to South Africa in 1966.

Their one-hour documentary, "RFK in the Land of Apartheid: A Ripple of Hope," is currently appearing at film festivals and private events. Track its progress from [the filmmakers' Web site](#), and see it if you get the chance.

This well-made film includes some never-before-seen footage from

Robert Kennedy's historic trip, as well as interviews with people who were there at the time, adding new information on Kennedy's journey to the record.

There are some moving and stunning photos of Kennedy reaching out to the crowds in Soweto. As one newspaper's headline said, "He renewed our courage." Kennedy gave the people of South Africa a gift they sorely needed: hope, the power of possibility.

The film opens with several young black South African men (born about after 1966) who are named "Kennedy" in his honor, and then cuts to Robert Kennedy's arrival.

Shots of "Whites Only" signs and tales from South Africans who were not interested in politics, but had politics forced upon them through apartheid, remind us of how recently people were obscenely and cruelly discriminated against solely because of the color of their skin.

The National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) held a yearly "Day of Affirmation," a day focused on academic and human freedom. The organization was nonracial, not associated with a particular political party, and opposed to apartheid.

The leaders reached out to Robert Kennedy, serving at that time as the Junior Senator from New York, and asked if he'd be interested in speaking in South Africa, "because," as one former member recalled, "he captured the idealism, the passion, of young people all over the world."

Ted Kennedy appears in the film to note that Robert, who had already fought several battles for civil rights while serving as Attorney General in his brother's administration, was drawn to the invitation, sensing in the students the same passion for justice he had witnessed in the civil rights movement in the United States.

Politically, this was not a winning issue for him. He already had the support of the African-American population at home, so there was little to be gained there. Many Americans neither knew nor cared what happened in such a distant place. And of course, Wall Street had numerous investments in South Africa.

In addition, anti-apartheid activists were routinely labeled "communists" despite the fact that communism only very rarely played a role in the anti-apartheid movement.

Right Thing to Do

But for Robert Kennedy, it was simply the right thing to do, the natural extension of his efforts to broaden civil rights at home. He was doing it because he wanted to learn about it for himself, and he wanted to speak out against apartheid.

It was the kind of thing politicians almost never do – a simple and

good thing, without any tangible reward at the end. He was undeniably, as the students noted in their welcoming song, a “jolly good fella, which nobody can deny.”

When Kennedy arrived at the airport, there was a “whites” area and a “non-whites” area. Kennedy chose to go to the non-whites area.

As one person commented, his landing was almost like someone from outer space, so far was he from their reality. Here was a prominent person the whole world knew of, coming to speak to all the people there, not just the power-brokers. Participants recalled the incredible exhilaration they felt upon seeing him.

Robert Kennedy’s own education in the civil rights movement had been slow, but steady. He credited the students he met along the way with educating him.

And that’s what made Robert Kennedy so special. He listened, he learned, and he grew. He didn’t choose political expediency. He followed an internal moral compass which he was constantly developing, one which ultimately led him to speak out against racial discrimination in the segregated country of South Africa.

On his way to the University of Cape Town to give his speech, Kennedy stopped to see the president of NUSAS, Ian Robertson.

Shortly before Kennedy’s arrival, the South African government had “banned” Ian Robertson, which meant, among other things, that he could not attend Kennedy’s speech. He was not allowed to meet with more than one person at a time, and could have been sent to jail for five years if he talked to the press.

Robert Kennedy went to Robertson’s home and asked if the place was bugged, suggesting techniques for disrupting bugging devices. When the surprised Robertson asked Kennedy how he knew about defeating bugs, Kennedy reminded him that he had once been Attorney General.

Kennedy’s speech at the University of Cape Town, given two years to the day before his death, has long been my favorite of all his speeches. His opening is captured forever in this film:

“I came here because of my deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which once imported slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage.

“I refer, of course, to the United States of America.” (This twist

brought huge laughter from the crowd, which had assumed he was talking about their own country until this line.)

The most famous part of his speech, etched on a stone wall near his grave in Arlington, is also referenced:

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

(You can [read his entire speech here](#). It is inspiring beyond measure. You can also hear him deliver it from the linked page.)

Addressing Apartheid

After Kennedy spoke in Cape Town, his next stop was the all-white pro-apartheid Stellenbosch University. There, his speech took quite a different tone. What if God was black, Kennedy asked the white students, who, surprisingly, gave him a vigorous ovation.

On the last night of the visit to the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, Kennedy gave his strongest speech yet, with words still relevant today giving the struggles in motion all over the African continent:

“There are those who say that the game is not worth the candle – that Africa is too primitive to develop, that its peoples are not ready for freedom and self-government, that violence and chaos are unchangeable. But those who say these things should look to the history of every part and parcel of the human race.

“It was not the black man of Africa who invented and used poison gas or the atomic bomb, who sent six million men and women and children to the gas ovens, and used their bodies as fertilizer. Hitler and Stalin and Tojo were not black men of Africa. And it was not the black men of Africa who bombed and obliterated Rotterdam and Shanghai and Dresden and Hiroshima.”

One of the high points of the trip for Robert Kennedy was meeting Chief Luthuli, who had tried to lead a nonviolent Gandhian resistance to apartheid. But Luthuli, like Robertson, had been banned, and could not organize any more. Robert Kennedy met with him at Luthuli’s home.

Ted Kennedy said that Luthuli made an enormous impression on Robert Kennedy. “My brother described him as one of the inspiring figures of our time. My brother felt that presence about it – it was one of those rare moments where greatness is revealed. Luthuli was always in his mind.”

The film ends with Kennedy’s visit in Soweto, the famously poor

ghetto outside of Johannesburg. His visit was a hugely important symbol. The people didn't have to come into the city to see him. He came out to the country to see them. He went into their homes. He talked to ordinary people.

He wasn't running for President at this time. He wasn't running for anything. He just wanted to talk to them, to hear their stories, to learn from them, and to offer them some moral support, and hope. It wasn't much, and yet it was tremendous. And the reactions of people talking about it, years later, show how lasting the effects of these simple, humane gestures were.

If Obama can reject the push from Cheney to become even more belligerent, more militaristic, if the President can try to continue to listen, and grow, and leave others with renewed hope, then he will have contributed something positive to the world. He will have earned his Nobel prize.

And he'll have made my very cold night sleeping on the Mall the night before his Inauguration nearly one year ago worth every shiver.

May the New Year help President Obama, and all of us, turn a kinder corner on the path of our collective history.

As Robert Kennedy said on the Day of Affirmation, "Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation."

Lisa Pease is a historian and writer who specializes in the mysteries of the John F. Kennedy era.

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