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# Triple Threat: Racism, Economic Exploitation and War

by Amaad Rivera

Dr. Martin Luther King spelled it out, forty years ago. The American people and the world face a triple-threat, the hydra-head of racism, economic exploitation and war. The Bush regime and its permanent war ambitions seek to enshrine the triple-threat to the planet as official policy of the U.S. government - placing the globe on death-watch. All dreams of urban renaissance, a renewed social contract, and amity among diverse cultures, are made moot by military spending, the economic Race to the Bottom, and relentless exploitation of racial tensions by the rich, who profit from social chaos. Barack Obama says Blacks have come "90 percent of the way" to equality - but the real fact is, African Americans possess only 15 cents of wealth compared to the median white citizens' dollar.

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poor and the Black are under attack."

People of color and the poor of this country are under attack, and they are losing. It is a fact that must move us toward collective action and a call for accountability on the part of our government. Forty years ago, Martin Luther King declared that the Vietnam War was, in actuality, a war on the American poor. He eloquently stated, "It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor - both Black and white - through the poverty program[s]. There were experiments, hopes, [and] new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad with war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continue to draw men and skills like some demonic destructive suction tube."

Looking at the current situation in our country&lsquo;the war in Iraq - we must come to a similar conclusion. Muhammad Ali's statement resonates today as it did during the Vietnam era: <sup>3</sup>If I thought going to war would bring freedom and equality to twenty-two million of my people, they wouldn't have to draft me. I'd join tomorrow.<sup>2</sup>

King articulates in later speeches that war is not the only activity that damages the foundation of the American dream for the most disfranchised - the poor and Black. It is aided and abetted by economic exploitation and racism. In essence, the poor and the Black are under attack by a triple

threat.

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With an eye on the past and a vision for the future, we have to look at the current political and social climate of this country with holistic criticism and calls for change. At this moment, we have spent \$384 billion on the war in Iraq. This summer we saw the dismantling of the historic Brown v. Board of Education court decision. This year we heard the housing bubble pop with one of the highest foreclosure rates in history. And today we feel the effects of having the largest disparities between the wealthy and the poor since the Great Depression, 78 years ago.

In the aftermath of these attacks - by high war spending, structural racism and economic exploitation&lsquo;we can see that the economic well-being of the poor and Blacks is the greatest casualty.

The exorbitant amount of money spent on the war in Iraq is draining our country's ability to provide quality anti-poverty programs to alleviate the growing economic stresses on the poor. In Massachusetts alone, \$12.9 billion has been spent on the war. With that same amount of tax revenue, Massachusetts could have had 1,338,788 scholarships for university students; 44,755 new affordable housing units; 966 new elementary schools, and a slew of new healthcare coverage for children and individuals. This war is happening at the cost of our most marginalized people and our future generations.

As a country, we need to look at the structural racism that persists in our legal system and public policies. Two years after Katrina, many homes are still not rebuilt. Individuals and families remain displaced. Promises made by our government have not been kept. Diversity policies in colleges are being eliminated and only 3% of the poorest of this country attend the wealthiest top universities, even though more have appropriate qualifications. Only 30% of Blacks go on to college. Blacks are six times as likely as whites to have been imprisoned at some point in their lives; according to the 2004 State of the Dream report issued by United for a Fair Economy, One out of 3 Black males will be imprisoned during their lifetime. The weapon of structural racism in our legal and public policy system is incredibly destructive. It continues to limit the economic mobility of people of color.

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people."

Often not mentioned as a weapon in the arsenal of the war on the Black and poor, is the economic exploitation that is ingrained in our country. Economic exploitation has slowly, and begrudgingly, become part of recent political discourse. While it struggles to rise to the forefront of mainstream discourse, it moves swiftly and unquenchably in communities of color and poverty across the nation.

Poverty rates nationally have more than quadrupled in communities of color, compared to their white counterparts. For every \$1 of white wealth, Blacks have 15 cents. Less than half the Black population owns homes, and 40% of those homes have sub-prime mortgage loans. These loans offer <sup>3</sup>low<sup>2</sup> rates, but after an initial period, typically 1-3 years, the mortgage payments skyrocket, for some to levels twice that of the initial monthly payment. These predatory practices leave families with mortgages they cannot afford and homes that will eventually undergo foreclosure. We are currently dealing with the greatest foreclosure rates in recent business history.

Homeownership is a keystone of the American dream and accounts for the largest percentage of wealth held by families and individuals in this country. Due to the triple threat, it is receding further from the grasp of the poor and people of color. Exploitation is cleaving the American dream in half, creating two dreams - Black and white, rich and poor, economically secure and economically strapped.

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There is a war going on, but it's not in Iraq, it's in this country. Not only is it a war on the poor and Black, but it's also a war against the foundation of equality and liberty that this country was built upon. The triple threat has begun and continues to shake the foundation of our country, leaving in its wake those who have voices but are not heard. War, racism and economic exploitation continue to erode and destroy the path for the poor and Black to get merit for their work and obtain the wealth they deserve, promise of which our constitution holds out so enticingly.

This is not a Black issue, nor is it just a person of color issue; it is a United States issue. Inequality hurts everyone and continues to infect our society. Let us call for the antibiotic of truth, accountability and fairness. Let us create a healthy country, all of whose people thrive. When we allow our country to dismantle the dreams of its people, what will we lose next?

In the words of Langston Hughes,

³What happens to a dream deferred? Does it  
dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?²

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