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# Liberation Theology, Violence and the Struggle for Social Change

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of violence in liberation struggle. This paper attempts to answer questions regarding the role of Christians and the Church in establishing social justice in human society and whether there is a place of the use of violence in this struggle. The study is anchored on the theoretical presuppositions of liberation theology where the focus is the emancipation of the poor masses from the grip of oppression, exploitation and de-humanization. The study concludes by arguing that in order to counter social injustice, what is needed is constructive and reasonable resistance to be exercised by a liberated Church.

**KEYWORDS:** Liberation theology, social justice, violence, oppression, freedom.

### INTRODUCTION

Liberation Theology is a radical theological movement that originated from Latin America under oppression. Latin America was for five centuries a dependent and exploited colony of Spanish and Portuguese imperialism. Liberation Theology started as a critical reflection on the gospel and social experiences of Latin Americans. It is a new hermeneutic that shows preference for the oppressed and the vulnerable. To that extent, Liberation Theology is deliberately, and unrepentantly a class theology with the highest commitment to liberate the poor from oppression and bondage through the overthrow of the status quo.

The source of inspiration in the liberation struggle is not the old, and fixed theological formulations, but social experience of a defined group the poor of the earth. Liberation Theology is therefore an expression of hope for the

oppressed peoples. Liberation Theology is a plea for a social revolution with the involvement of the church. It is the opinion of liberation theologians that Christianity has liberative and revolutionary capabilities to set the victims of oppression free.

Jurgen Moltmann avers that "in the present struggle for liberty and justice, Christians must side with the humanity of the oppressed" (Moltmann, 1969:75). Frederick Engels reminds us that Christianity at the very beginning was a movement of oppressed people and that early Christianity was "the religion of slaves and freedmen, of poor people deprived of all rights, of people subjugated or dispersed by Rome" (Marx and Engels, 1957:269). Engels observed that both Christianity and workers' socialism believe and expect futuristic salvation from bondage and misery, but that the only difference between the two is that "Christianity places this salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven; socialism places it in this world in a transformation of society (Engels, 1957:269).

The Catholic Church is under pressure to integrate and adopt liberative praxis. Liberation Theology is not a new addition to conservative theology but a fresh and new idea that is expected to replace the old. It is a form of action and practical response to the socio-political realities of modern society. Commenting on the distinctive perspective of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutierrez said:

"It is a process of reflection which starts out from historical praxis. It attempts to ponder the faith from the standpoint of this historical praxis and the way that is actually lived in a commitment to liberation". (Gutierrez, 1968:11).

Gutierrez describes Liberation Theology as "an *actus secundus*, a second step of critical reflection which follows after the praxis of faith" (Gutierrez, 1980: 33). Critical reflection in the words of Gutierrez is a pre-understanding of faith as manifested in life and concrete action to liberate the oppressed (Gutierrez, 1973:3). Gutierrez insists that the church must articulate a coherent and critical attitude toward economic and socio-cultural issues (Gutierrez, 1973:11). Theology must be transformed into the criticism of society and the church (Gutierrez, 1973:11). Gutierrez writes:

"The characteristic mission of Christians is proclaiming the gospel, the good news of gratuitous love of God for every person but preferentially for the poor and the excluded. This proclamation takes place in terms of deed and words embodied in human history..." (Gutierrez, 1997:xv).

Modern man lives in a turbulent world of violence. Apart from full scale armed conflict which has led to displacement of persons and families, other

forms of violence includes bomb blasts, terrorist attacks, suicide bombers, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and humiliation and torture of women and children. Human existence in the age of technological advancement has become insecure, conflict-ridden and problematic. Social life is dictated by terrible and unbearable pressures. The problem of poverty, racial discrimination, marginalization and institutionalization of neo-colonialism in third world countries gives credence to the conviction that we are in a revolutionary situation.

Society can't afford to use old methods in tackling new problems. It is also true that most of these problems do not affect all nations at the same gravity; therefore, solutions are not only going to be variegated, but contextualized. The issue of religion and the attitude of religious people to violence have changed over the centuries. Since people live in a nuclear age, provision must be made for violence in our theology. This may appear senseless and ungodly, Albert Einstein has rightly said: "The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking; and thus we are drifting towards unparalleled catastrophe ... A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive" (qtd. in Stott 1984:80).

While we are not advocating for a new theology of violence, the religious community must go back to re-read their sacred texts to understand the historic linkage between religion and violence. The nation of Israel conquered Canaan mostly through armed aggression that was ordered and supervised by Yahweh the national deity of Israel. Moses and Joshua were not only political leaders but warlords, who commanded battalions with success. The present predicament requires a new and radical re-orientation of global and collective psychic-vent, if mankind is to survive.

### WHAT IS VIOLENCE?

Etymologically, our English word "violence" has two Latin roots, *violentia* meaning 'impetuosity' and *violare* meaning 'to do violence'. In the ordinary usage, 'violence' is the exercise or the application of physical force, usually affecting or intended to effect injuries or destruction. It also connotes, powerful, untamed, or devastating force; an unjust, unwarranted, or unlawful display of force, especially such as tends to intimidate (*Collins English Dictionary*, 1985:1617). Websters Collegiate Dictionary defines violence as the "exertion of any physical force considered with reference to its effect on another than the agent" (1978: 200). The adjective 'violent' is synonymous with "moving, acting or characterized by physical, especially by extreme and sudden, or by unjust or improper force" (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1978: 200).

James Childress has defined violence as "direct, intentional, and unauthorized harm which is against the will of the one harmed" (Childress, 1972:378). George Edward in his Jesus and the Politics of Violence, defines violence "as physical force resulting in injury, or destruction of property, or persons in violation of general moral belief or civil law" (Edward, 1972: 19). Richard Hofstadter, in his American Violence: A Documentary History, defines

violence "as that which kill or injures person or do significant damage to property" (Hofstadter, 1970:71).

Robert Brown defines violence as "the violation of personhood". By this definition, Brown has expanded the scope of our reflection. It is now glaring that "personhood" can be violated, or denied in subtle ways that are not obvious, except to the victim (Brown, 1973:7). In August, 1968, there was a well attended Episcopal Conference of Latin America held in Medellin, Colombia. One of the documents endorsed by more than nine hundred priests was tagged "Latin America: A Continent of Violence". That document carried the official Medellin Conference definition of violence: "The violence we are talking about is the violence that a minority of privileged people has waged against the vast majority of deprived people. It is the violence of hunger, helplessness, and underdevelopment. It is the violence of persecution, oppression and neglect" (qtd. in Brown 1973:44).

Brown observes that there can be "violation of personhood" quite apart from the doing of physical harm. "When we talk about a 'person', we are not talking about an object but about a subject. We are describing someone who is not quantifiable or inter-changeable with another (Brown, 1973:7). "Personhood" means the totality of the individual and each person has a unique worth. Gustavo Gutierrez has further expanded the purview of our discourse, when he observed that a violated person is a non-human, that is, "the human being who is not recognized as such by the prevailing social order. These are the poor and exploited people, the ones who are systematically and legally despoiled of their being human, those who scarcely know what a human being might be..." (Gutierrez, 1974:41). Daniel Berrigan has argued that "no principle is worth the sacrifice of a single human" (Berrigan, 1972:27). Any action that depersonalized a human being would be an act of violence. The absurd reduction of the human person to an unrecognizable, crude, animal-like, inanimate object through deprivation, massive exploitation and marginalization is the worst stage of structural violence.

#### **VIOLENCE IN THE BIBLE**

Merrill Unger has defined "violence" as "vehement, forcible or destructive action, often involving infringement, outrage or assault" (Unger, 1977:1158). The most frequently used Hebrew word for "violence" in the Old Testament is hamas, which means injustice, oppression, wickedness, falsehood and cruelty. It implies the sense of using violence with evil intent (Gen. 6: 11, 13; 49: 5). In interpreting the Hebrew meaning of hamas, George Nalunnakkal has this to say: "In Gen. 16:5, hamas means 'causing injustice'. Here Sarah protests against Abraham for having caused her violence by accepting Hagar as his concubine... This suggests that the purview of hamas also embraces institutional forms of violence such as patriarchy, sexism, and immorality" (Nalunnakkal, 2003:3).

*Hamas* also implies wickedness, corruption and violation of societal norms and values. *Hamas* occurs sixty times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Another

Hebrew word that is translated as "violence" in the Old Testament is *ashaq*, which literally means 'to oppress' or to treat with injustice and violence. Nalunnakkal elucidates further on the meaning of *ashaq*: "it entails acts of abuse of power and authority, and ruling over those lower in status, in a hegemonic and callous manner. The Arabic equivalent of the word also denotes injustice, roughness, and ill-treatment. By and large, *ashaq* refers to some unfavorable treatment of the vulnerable and defenseless, particularly the orphan, the widow, the sojourner and the poor" (Nalunnakkal, 2003:4).

The Hebrew word *gazal* is also interpreted as 'violence' in the Old Testament, with thirty occurrences. It means "to strip off", "to pluck off", "plunder", "loot", "tear away" and "take by force". In Job 20:1 9, *gazal* means 'exploiting the poor', while in Micah 2:2, it means greed and covetousness (Nalunnakkal, 2003:4). Unger interprets *gazal* as: "Seizing another's property by fraud or injustice, especially of the rich and powerful who seize upon the possessions of the poor by fraud and force" (Unger, 1977:1158, 1159).

In Hebrew thought, violence is not seen only from the perspective of social disequilibrium; it is also the disruption of the ontological order. Nalunnakkal writes on the perception of violence in the Old Testament: "....Violence embraces an entire spectrum of the ethical and moral life of Israel, involving both direct and indirect forms of violence such as oppression of the poor by the rich, economical capitalism, corruption, adultery, rape and racism. Violence is also perceived from a teleological perspective, that is, in terms of its principal consequence and outcome" (Nalunnakkal, 2003:4, 5).

#### LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND VIOLENCE

At the risk of contradiction, Gutierrez posited that while Liberation Theology is not to be understood as a Christian ideology of revolution, it does not ignore the process of revolution since the starting point of Liberation Theology is inserted in the revolutionary process. Liberation Theology intends to make the revolutionary process self-critical, comprehensive and radical through the framing of political commitment into the scheme of liberation. While Christ's liberation is not limited to political action, the process of liberation can only occur within the matrix of historical development and concrete political actions (Gutierrez, 1980:24).

Political liberation in the words of Gutierrez is not a form of cheap religious messianism but an autonomous social movement with clearly stipulated political goals and vision. It is in the political dimension of liberation that Liberation Theology is stipulated within historical praxis, which in itself is liberation praxis: "It implies identification with oppressed human beings and social classes and solidarity with their interest and struggles. It involves immersion in the political process of revolution" (Gutierrez, 1980:24).

It is the opinion of Gutierrez that the mandate to proclaim the gospel and the need to identify with the poor compels the church to be in solidarity with the classes that are victims of exploitation and to work towards the abolition of a society that was built for the benefit of the few. The pursuit of a just and egalitarian society requires radical break with the past, a re-reading of the Scriptures and a new orientation in ecclesiology which "means different ways of being present in the world of common people... It means knowing how to listen to a voice that is different from the ones we are used to hearing..." (Gutierrez, 1980:30).

Political engagement requires concrete and realizable strategies, tactics and objective social analysis. Liberation Theology is very different from academic theology; it is a theology of the people with popular consciousness, analogous to the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of *sensus fidelium* as a theological criterium (Bonino, 1975:69). In a Marxian frame of thought, theology must metamorphose from explaining the world into changing it. Theology must adopt orthopraxis and repudiate orthodoxy (Bonino, 1975:81).

Liberation Theologians are in agreement that Christian solidarity with the poor can be demonstrated with a revolutionary class struggle to overthrow the status quo and impose a just society. Karl Barth who was not a liberation theologian once observed that "God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly" (Barth, 1961:386). There is no ambiguity on divine support in the struggle to pull down an unjust order in human society. God as the liberating power in human history has always sided with the poor and the oppressed: "I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold in bondage and I have remembered my covenant... I am Yahweh, and I will liberate you from the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage" (Exo. 6:2-7:59).

Peter C. Hodgson avers that the various forms of bondage have a sociopolitical implication which involves institutionalization of oppressive powers in ideological and economic structures. Hodgson posited that conflict struggle, active and revolutionary use of power is inevitable in the liberation process, but violence as a deliberate strategy that does not eventuate in liberation is completely unacceptable (Hodgson, 1976:326). Hodgson maintains that violence is capable of subverting the very essence of political institutions, which include providing a platform for free speech, action and nonviolent adjudication of conflicts. Violence in several contexts precludes the possibility for dialogue, conflict management and resolution.

Violence in the words of Hodgson is "a highly undialectical act" (Hodgson, 1976:320). "Instead of keeping history open and moving it, it has a deadening, paralyzing effect. It does not represent a new birth but an abortion... Nonviolence rather than violence, then, must serve as a policy or way of life" (Hodgson, 1976:320-321). Hodgson carefully warned that nonviolence should not be absolutized, since it cannot prevent the inevitable risk of violence in human liberation. And that there are situations when violence is generated through the use of power and becomes "uncalculated and unavoidable necessity" (Hodgson, 1976:321).

...when conditions grow so inhuman, degrading, or totally threatening that it is better to die than not to resist violently or to act in self-defense....But even when violence takes the form of killing, as in wars and revolutions, it cannot be denied that in the clearing created by violence new possibilities may sometimes emerge. Indeed, it is not beyond the power of God to use revolutionary violence as an occasion for a dialectical transfiguration (Hodgson, 1976: 321).

Violence in the thoughts of Hodgson is *prima facie* an "undialectical act" that occurs as a result of breakdown of human power. "Yet in the vacuum, the abyss, the abortion of possibility occasioned by violence, God and God alone can act, engendering history anew, bringing life out of death. The risen Christ is also present in wars and revolutions, which serves as the locus of his *opus alienum*" (Hodgson, 1976:321).

Jose Bonino sees conflict and violence as platforms to liberate humanity from conditions of slavery, vengeance, arbitrariness, oppression, lack of protection and usurpation that frustrate an individual, or group of persons from acting as responsible agents of God in interpersonal relationship.

...given the conditions in which human life develops, it is also not surprising that God's announcement commandment comes almost always as a call to the creation of a new situation, to a transformation and righting of the status quo. This is the priority to which the insistence on liberation legitimately points (Bonino, 1975:118).

The correlation between a theology of revolution and a theology of violence cannot be denied. Alfredo Fierro in his *The Militant Gospel* pointed to the fact that it is not possible to achieve any positive liberation either revolutionary or mere protest without some sort of violence.

Violence is shared by all movements of liberation, revolution, or protest. It gives them concrete form, fleshing them out in the real world. Without violence they lose themselves in abstraction, unreality, and ineffectiveness. The only way to subvert the dominant powers of oppression is to oppose them with an antagonistic power. Conflict and a clash between powers in a word, violence -- is inherent in any serious social change (Fierro, 1977:201-202).

### LIBERATION THEORIES OF VIOLENCE

Dom Helder Camara in his Spiral of Violence provides a theoretical

framework that explains escalation of violence. Violence number one in the thoughts of Camara is the pervasive injustice that reduces human beings to a sub-human condition. Sub-human condition covers the heritage of poverty that is characterized by hunger, illiteracy, unemployment, insecurity and homelessness. Camara posited that "poverty kills just as surely as the bloodiest war. But poverty does more than kill; it leads to physical deformity, to psychological deformity, and to moral deformity" (Camara, 1971:25-26). Violence no. 1 is the structural-institutionalized violence that reduces human beings to slaves. It is the oppressive power structure that imposes, and perpetuates injustices, humiliations, restrictions, hopelessness and dehumanization on the vulnerable population.

Since violence attracts violence, violence no. 1 will lead to violence no. 2 that is revolt against oppression. This may assume the dimension of armed aggression where young people are mobilized and enlisted for warfare. Herein lies the causes of youth restiveness. Camara writes:

"The young no longer have the patience to wait for the privileged to discard their privileges. The young very often see government too tied to the privileged classes. The young are losing confidence in the churches, which affirm beautiful principles.... without ever deciding, at least so far, to translate them into real life. The young, then are turning more and more to radical action and violence. In some places the young are the force of idealism, fire, hunger for justice, and thirst for authenticity. In others, with the same enthusiasm, they adopt extremist ideologies and prepare for guerilla warfare." (Camara, 1971:33).

Violence no. 3 is governmental repression. At this point government deploys violence to restore public order. It may entail shooting at sight, capturing the protagonists of violence no. 2 life, or death. In some cases, physical and mental torture. Camara sees the world in a real threat of an escalation of violence. With the legitimation of extra judicial killing, civil dictatorship and corrupt political leadership across the globe, violence may soon become the accepted norm in the 21st century.

The Ibero-Salvadoran liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuria who was assassinated by the elite squadron of Salvadoran army in November 16, 1989, identified three types of violence: (1) Structural-institutional violence; (2) Repressive violence and (3) Revolutionary violence. Structural-institutional violence in the thoughts of Ellacuria is an extreme form of oppression, seen to be more than unjust that threatens basic needs and survival of human beings. When many citizens are out of work, or when the state fails to provide educational opportunities, then structural violence has been committed. Ellacuria writes:

"When a social order, and not a political order, is structured in such a way that the greater part of the population...... finds itself forced to live in a desperate poverty which constantly threatens their very lives, lives which do not have even the minimum for subsistence and for overcoming the constant threat of hunger, sickness, and the lack of education, shelter, work, etc..... it must be said that such an order is not only unjust but violent." (Ellacuria, 2001: 4-5).

Ellacuria argues that structures of deprivation and dehumanization are unjust because human beings are denied the minimum and basic necessities of life. The first violence, that is institutional-structural violence is often consolidated and perpetuated through a second type of violence, repressive violence. Repressive measures may include government propaganda machineries through the media, and ideological manipulation of educational, or religious platforms. Through concerted propaganda, it may be possible to misinform the masses to believe that their miseries are natural and not man-made. Ellacuria argued persuasively that ideological repression is prima facie a form of structural violence.

If propaganda does not work, then the ruling elites may adopt more violent means of repression. A violent crackdown on the opposition may be justified as the protection of national security. Grassroots movements that work for social change may be described as "terrorists". Any action that threatens the security of the unjust social order and its political machinery may be targeted for destruction. The third kind of violence according to Ellacuria is the revolutionary violence which is an "inevitable response" to an evil "that prevents any other reasonable, non-violent attempt to end a state of affairs that is first and foremost not just the annulment of political rights but the negation of life itself" (Ellacuria, 2001:6).

### WHAT IS JUSTICE?

Justice is the essential condition for peace. One may ask what is justice? According to Collins English Dictionary (1985: 794), justice is: "1) The quality or act of being just, 2) The moral principle that determines the fairness of action, 3) The administration of law according to prescribed and accepted principles, 4) Conformity to the law, legal validity". P. J. Glenn, in his A Tour of the Summa, defines justice as "The constant and perpetual will to render to everyone what is due to him" (Glenn, 1961:222). N. S. S. Iwe's definition of justice is based on functionality: "Justice is a moral virtue which inclines the will constantly and perpetually to render to others their due in time and place and in a given set of circumstances" (Iwe, 1979: 236). Brown writes: "When society is so organized that any child is deprived of those things he is entitled to have (food, clothing, education, for example), that society is unjust and is engaging in violence against the child" (Brown, 1973:9).

Poverty in an affluent society is indefensible. It is unacceptable for some people to live in ghettoes, slums and shanty demoralizing habitat, while others are allowed to wallow in squandermania. The gross disparity between the wealthy class and the poor masses constitute the climax of social injustice. Iwe writes: "Society should not permit the accumulation of the resources of the community in the hands of a few. Here it stands to reason that humanity should mobilize and display all its resources of raw materials, capital, man-power and technology to ensure that no region of the world suffocates in material affluence, while the rest of humanity is perishing in penury and hunger" (Iwe, 1979:243).

The equation of violence with injustice is not a new phenomenon; it was embedded even in the medieval philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas when he said: "Unjust laws are acts of violence rather than laws. If a law is not derived from the eternal law, framed according to the proper use of reason, it is a wicked law, and so lacking the true nature of law, it is a rather kind of violence" (Aquinas, 1952:50). Thomas Rose has fortified the opinion of all the scholars quoted above when he said "The basic cause of most violent revolt is injustice and inequity, violation of personhood, and symbolic violence" (Rose, 1971:20).

#### CONCLUSION

The use of violence as a strategy for liberation cannot proceed without provoking the Christian conscience. The question before us now is: Can we find any example in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth that justifies the elimination of an enemy? Did Jesus encourage his followers to engage in acts of violence, retaliation or resistance? If we are to rely on the doctrine of second or extra miles as presented in Luke 6:27-29 and Mathew 5:38-48, then, violence cannot be Christianized. In Luke 6:27, Jesus commanded his followers to love their enemies and "do good to those who hate you". In verse 29 Jesus taught his followers tolerance and patience "To him who strikes you on the cheek offer the other also". In Mathew 5:39 Jesus commanded his followers "not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" In verse 4, Jesus said "whoever compels you to go one mile, go with two".

It is glaring that the ethics of Jesus does not support violence, or violent actions. Some scholars are of the view that the ethical standards of Jesus are impracticable in real life situation. Perhaps the most disturbing and problematic is the command of Jesus for his followers to love their enemies. Here is the response of Gutierrez:

To love all men does not mean avoiding confrontations; it does not mean preserving a fictitious harmony...In the context of class struggle today, to love one's enemies presupposes recognizing and accepting that one has class enemies and that it is necessary to combat them. It is not a question of having no enemies, but rather of not excluding them from our love. But love does not mean that the oppressors are no longer enemies,

nor does it eliminate radicalness of the combat against them. "Love of enemies" does not ease tensions; rather it challenges the whole system and becomes a subversive formula (Gutierrez, 1973:275 -276).

Gutierrez argues further that to love ones enemies means using every strategy to liberate them from their inhuman condition as oppressors, that is: "liberating them from themselves. But this cannot be achieved except by resolutely opting for the oppressed, that is, by combating the oppressive class. It must be a real and effective combat not hate. This is the challenge, as new as the Gospel: to love our enemies" (Gutierrez, 1973:276).

There is a consensus among Christian pacifists that there is a consistent evidence in the New Testament that Jesus did not only renounce violence, but was allergic to violence and coercive power, and that the attitude of Jesus to violence serves as a precedent for Christians. The use of violence for the attainment of liberation may not have a scriptural support from the New Testament, but the protagonists of this new movement are convinced that in the process of conscientization, actions must be taken against oppressive structures. Violence is seen in Liberation Theology as a desperate and indispensable option that must be adopted if liberation is to be a reality. Liberation Theologians are of the opinion that for religious leaders to remain passive when so many people are starving and dying of hunger is an utter display of cowardice.

World history has left positive precedents that Christian leaders of past generations were at the forefront of liberation struggle. History has it that many Christian leaders sacrificed their lives to ensure that slave trade was abolished. Men of conscience who presided over the affairs of the church in those good old days wielded so much influence in the larger society and were highly respected by government. The church must monitor and criticize the government on all matters of public interest.

In this paper, a general survey of most of the contemporary researches on Liberation Theology, peace, violence and conflict resolution was carried out. The paper does not encourage pacifism, but argues for constructive and reasonable resistance. Religion must no longer play a tranquilizing role for consolidation of structural violence. There are social responsibilities which the Church must accept as a challenge. Peace at all cost is a misnomer in the present revolutionary situation. Justice is *conditio-sine-qua-non* for peace. Poverty is man-made and must be viewed as a social evil. Eschatological and transcendental consolation of the exploited class tantamount to consolidation of capitalism. John Kennedy said "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable" (qtd. in Brown 1973:73). There will be no lasting change except society has men of conscience at the apex of our social engineering. The first institution to be liberated is the Church, after that all Christians must be mobilized for the fight against social injustice. This paper concludes with the thought-provoking prayers of J. G. Holland: "God give us men.

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A time like this demands strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands. Men whom the lust of office does not kill, men whom the spoils of office cannot buy; men who possess opinions and a will..." (qtd. in Thisweek 1988:29).

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