

The need for racial reconciliation in the USA



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By Charles McKelvey

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The motto of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was “To redeem the soul of America.” Indeed, the mission of that organization of Southern black ministers, established in 1957 with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as president, was nothing less than the spiritual transformation of the nation, bringing it to the fulfillment of the promise of democracy proclaimed at its birth.

What came to be known as the Civil Rights Movement culminated in the Civil Rights Law of 1964 and the Voting Rights Law of 1965, which heralded significant gains with respect to the civil and political rights of African Americans and others. These gains were the result of the increased strength of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, due to black migration to the North and black urbanization in the South, and also as a consequence of the fact that its demands were for the most part favored by international dynamics. The gains were both in law and culture. Blatant discrimination in public accommodations became a thing of the past. Laws mandating equality could not eliminate racist attitudes that had been formed throughout the history of the nation. But a decisive turn was taken, and racism

became more hidden and subtle.

However, long-standing goals of the African-American Movement remained unattained. Dr. King believed that the Civil Rights and Voting Rights laws meant that the struggle was moving to a new stage of focus on social and economic rights, such as food, housing, education, and health. King wrote of his disappointment that white allies of the Civil Rights Movement had disappeared, seeming to believe that the struggle was over, not recognizing that it was entering a new stage. King therefore moved from a strategy of forming what he called a "coalition of conscience," which involved the support of whites who for moral reasons supported black demands; to the development of a coalition of all persons, regardless of race or ethnicity, with a common economic interest. To this end, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized the Poor People's Campaign, demanding an "economic Bill of Rights," including full employment, a guaranteed income, and the construction of low-income housing. The Poor People's Campaign was constituted by blacks, whites, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans.

Malcolm X also formulated significant proposals, rooted in the Pan-Africanism and black nationalism of the urban North. Malcolm taught of the need for black control of the political, economic, and cultural institutions of the black community, as necessary for the social and economic development of the black community. This proposal has significant implications for law enforcement in the black community, which Malcolm argued ought to be under the control of the local black community. Local control of law enforcement and criminal justice institutions would empower the people, enabling the development of a police force that responds to the needs of the community.

At the same time, both Malcolm and Martin evolved considerably in the last year of their lives toward an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial critique of U.S. foreign policy, stimulated by trips to Africa, in the case of Malcolm, and opposition to the war in Vietnam, in the case of King. Both spoke of the significance of Third World revolutions.

But we have forgotten our prophetic voices. Jesse Jackson resurrected their ideas in his presidential campaigns of 1984 and 1988. However, in the final analysis, structural change is not forged by a new President. An alternative more just society is built by a political/educational mass organization that educates and organizes the peoples, with the goal of ultimately taking control of the legislative and executive branches of the federal government. From such a position of partial control of the state, a new stage of struggle would begin, seeking to attain control, through constitutionally legitimate means, of other parts of the state, including the judicial branch, the military, and the deep state; and which seeks to reform as well the media and the educational system.

White society never listened to the prophetic voices of the American nation. It never arrived to understand that the message went far beyond black civil rights to proclaim the emancipation of the entire nation and the world. The white activist organizations today that are a legacy of the era of Malcolm and Martin do not begin to approach an understanding of their prophetic visions for the future of America.

But the black community also has forgotten the message of the prophets, at least that sector of the black community that somehow has presence in the media and as public intellectuals. There are important efforts in the community, like the efforts George Floyd, the most recent victim of police violence, who worked as a community leader in a religious ministry. But more should be done to build black communities in accordance with the principle of local community control, including control of local law enforcement. And there should be a greater effort to work with other popular sectors in the forging of a political force that seeks to empower all of the people through the development of structures of popular education and through structural reform of the political processes of the nation; with the intention of taking political power as delegates of the people, in order to direct the state toward the protection of the social and economic rights of all citizens as well as toward cooperation with the nations of the world in the development of a more just, democratic, and sustainable world order. For the most part, spokespersons

for the black community have focused on the subtle forms in which white racism endures, rather than the unfinished agenda of the African-American movement, proclaimed by Malcolm and Martin.

In political debates and street conflicts, we tend to focus on symptoms rather than structural and systemic sources. Such superficiality tends to lead toward greater polarization. But our task must be the formation of a societal consensus that is rooted in a comprehensive understanding and a commitment to social justice.

Much depends on the way that issues are framed. Statistics show that unarmed black men are killed disproportionately by police, but they also indicate that, in absolute numbers, more white men are killed. Could not this issue be framed in a less racially polarizing way, as the problem of an overly conflictive relation between the police and citizenry, which, to be acknowledged, especially has manifestations in black communities? Might this be related to Malcom's proposal of local community control of institutions in the black community?

The killing of an unarmed citizen by a police officer is something that simply should not occur. But we all must accept responsibility for it. We should have built the structures that would have reduced its possibility. And if it were to occur, we at least would have confidence that the institutions that we have built together would respond to the matter with fairness and justice.

Justice cannot be demanded from the street, where division and conflict dominate the discourse, and where there are constant efforts to manipulate images, even when the demonstration is nonviolent. In the uprising in recent days, the protests became violent, and whites could be seen among the violent protesters. Some may have been present to express the outrage that they also feel. But are there whites in the streets seeking to foment division between blacks and whites, motivated by a superficial political perspective either of the Left or of the Right?

A just society must be constructed by the people, all of the people united, with courage, commitment, discipline, and sacrifice; in the long term, one day at a time. Non-violent demonstrations in the street have their place, but as a supplement to working together to build a just and democratic institutions.

It is easy to blame the white cop, whom an undemocratic and unjust system placed as a police officer in a community that he did not understand. But castigating him will not compensate for our own failures.

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