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Riots, statues and cops

By Steve Bakke  July 23, 2020



Frederick Douglass

At times like these, reasonable people's minds fill with sincere thoughts. Here are some things I've been thinking about.

I often express frustration about our society's tendency to react ineffectively after serious crises, such as gun violence or burning down police stations. We're attracted to "feel good" attempts at solving problems. Those are foolish emotional sedatives, and we don't need them. For example, too many public officials try to promote peace by ordering police to stand down while: watching a police station burn, looking the other way when George Washington's statue is spray-painted; or allowing the occupation of "autonomous zones" such as occurred in Seattle. That's a formula for more violence. And it will continue unless police or federal law enforcement agencies make it stop.

A few days ago, on a California street, two people painted over a "Black Lives Matter" mural. Supporters of the mural, along with many public officials, demanded that this couple be brought to justice. Yet these same groups offered little apparent objection following the desecration or destruction of statues of National Anthem composer Francis Scott Key, former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, Union General Ulysses S. Grant, or President George Washington. Let's acknowledge the obvious contradiction and hope for more effective expenditures of dollars and energy.

Some supporters of the indiscriminate destruction of statues wonder how anyone can attach importance to statues and monuments – after all, they're just metal and stone. My response to that must echo their comments: Why attach importance to destroying those metal and stone monuments if they're so unimportant? Let's acknowledge the symbolism for both sides, stop the destruction, save our energy and unite to find real solutions.

We're asked to support an organization, BLM, that has become associated with the following ideas: racists cops are killing huge numbers of unarmed blacks; BLM leaders express a desire to abolish (not just defund) police departments; the BLM website expresses a desire to "disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure;" many of its members have been involved or supportive of the pointless anarchy and violence we've been witnessing; and its founders and leaders are self-described "trained Marxists." Black lives have immeasurable value, to be sure, but the proximity of this organization to many of these ideas stifles support.

Regarding police reform, we can do a better job in many ways, but not just because of the number of unarmed Blacks shot and killed by cops. According to the Washington Post's database of fatal police shootings, that total has been shrinking and is now relatively modest – approximately 15 in 2019. Sadly, by my personal count, the killings associated with recent riots already exceeds 2019's total. And in Chicago, the numbers of blacks shot and killed each weekend usually exceeds that yearly total. We must focus on that too.

Fortunately, these numbers have been coming down, at least until recent months. Nevertheless, we should study all aspects of crime and law enforcement to identify other issues relevant to reform efforts. And while we're improving law enforcement, let's work to find other even more significant causes of our cultural and racial tensions – they're there. We should all be "finding and fixing."

Immediately after the Memorial Day murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, I thought we had a chance at unity for dealing with the violence and racial tension plaguing our society. I saw an opportunity for legitimate protests to deliver an important message, but anarchists stole the stage with violence, looting, and destruction – and it continues still. Unfortunately, the protesters' initial legitimacy seemed to automatically transfer to the undeserving violent anarchists. When the first brick was thrown, and police were told to stand down and take no action, we lost an opportunity to shorten this nightmare.

Many state and local governments now tacitly encourage violence by supporting the straw-man argument of defunding police. That argument, along with failure to take immediate law enforcement action when anarchists climbed onto the stage, has led us into the hole we're in.

Old fashioned tolerance has evolved into intolerance, political correctness, and identity politics. "Wokeness" doesn't abide disagreement or debate, and that produces fear of "speaking out," even when accurate facts or reasonable opinions would be expressed. Intimidation and fear are incompatible with freedom and make it impossible for all viewpoints to work together.

What was once mere disagreement is now called "being offended." I, along with most Americans of all races, reject the idea of reasonable people being "cancelled" simply because someone says they're offended. Is anyone else sick of this apparently impossible societal stalemate?



Base of Frederick Douglass statue after being torn down