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NEED FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT REFORM? YES, BUT THERE'S SO MUCH MORE!

By Steve Bakke  June 9, 2020



Martin Luther King's Inspirational Leadership - 1963



Rioting and looting a Minneapolis Target store - May 2020

We entered 2020 embedded in an impeachment trial. Then came a worldwide pandemic. And now we're facing the aftermath of the brutal killing of George Floyd by a rogue Minneapolis police officer. And did I mention that it's a presidential election year? Bitter political rhetoric seriously complicates dealing with this worldwide, societal "perfect storm."

Americans agreed that the police officer should be arrested and charged. And there's general agreement that there are things to be examined in law enforcement, including hiring, training, and accountability. Tragically, this potentially unifying national reaction was significantly nullified when, in the days following the killing, domestic terrorists moved in under the guise of legitimate protest.

Legitimate protest was drowned out by pointless domestic terrorism, anarchy, and violence. No one has the absolute right to create violent chaos, under any circumstances. Very few of the rioters came there with good intentions and they burned, maimed, and killed. I believe their actions tainted, and perhaps ruined, any real justice for George Floyd.

We'll end up disappointed if our reform efforts are focused only on police involvement in black deaths. We should also acknowledge and demand attention for the many tragic events surrounding the legitimate protests. I'm referring to the relative silence surrounding the execution of retired St. Louis police Captain David Dorn while protecting his friend's store from the rioters. And there's been too little public emotion expended on the ambush killing of Santa Cruz policeman Sergeant Damon Gutzwiller. Other examples abound. Sadly, the number of lives lost in these riots already exceeds the annual rate of unarmed blacks killed by police officers.

While we are intensifying the attention on black deaths from homicide, we must widen that concern in another way. We'll get the best results if this collective angst is extended beyond police involved deaths to address the other 99% of black homicide victims. Why limit the effort?

We've seen many attempts to deal with violence and societal problems. Typically, these ideas end up desperately grasping for ideas that quickly come to mind, but which eventually hit a dead end. If we want to improve this problem, we must understand that there are other underlying causes for eruptions of anarchy and violence. Smart law enforcement reform is a good thing, but unless we dig deeper, we'll once again head down that same path of hasty "feel-good" solutions that solve nothing.

We should be honest with ourselves by considering more nuanced causes of societal problems and violence. I believe we've "fuzzied" the edges between morality and immorality. Moral absolutes have been set aside in favor of unlimited tolerance and making personal decisions about right and wrong. "Urban poverty plantations" partially reflect failed social programs and are breeding grounds for hatred, racism and violence. And societal forces seem to have led to a growing disregard for the lives of others. All of these fuel violence of this type.

I believe that we'd be better off today if we hadn't turned our backs on the wise advice provided by Martin Luther King. In 1963, he told us of his dream: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Rather than deemphasizing differences, "identity politics" emphasizes them. Declaring oneself "blind to skin color," rather than being a declaration of acceptance, is now considered racism.

There are also too many with attitudes about violent rioting that inhibit progress. Consider these comments: "America is burning, but that's how forests grow" said the Massachusetts Attorney General; "riots are an integral part of the country's march toward progress"; "ashes are symbolic.....of pain unheard"; and "[destroying property] is not violence." These reactions are at best, unhelpful.

Finally, let's take time to examine all the potential causes of destructive attitudes and actions. We have moral and spiritual breakdowns to recover from. And the task of reducing prejudice and stereotypes is a two-way street. Law enforcement reform is important, but there is so much more to consider.